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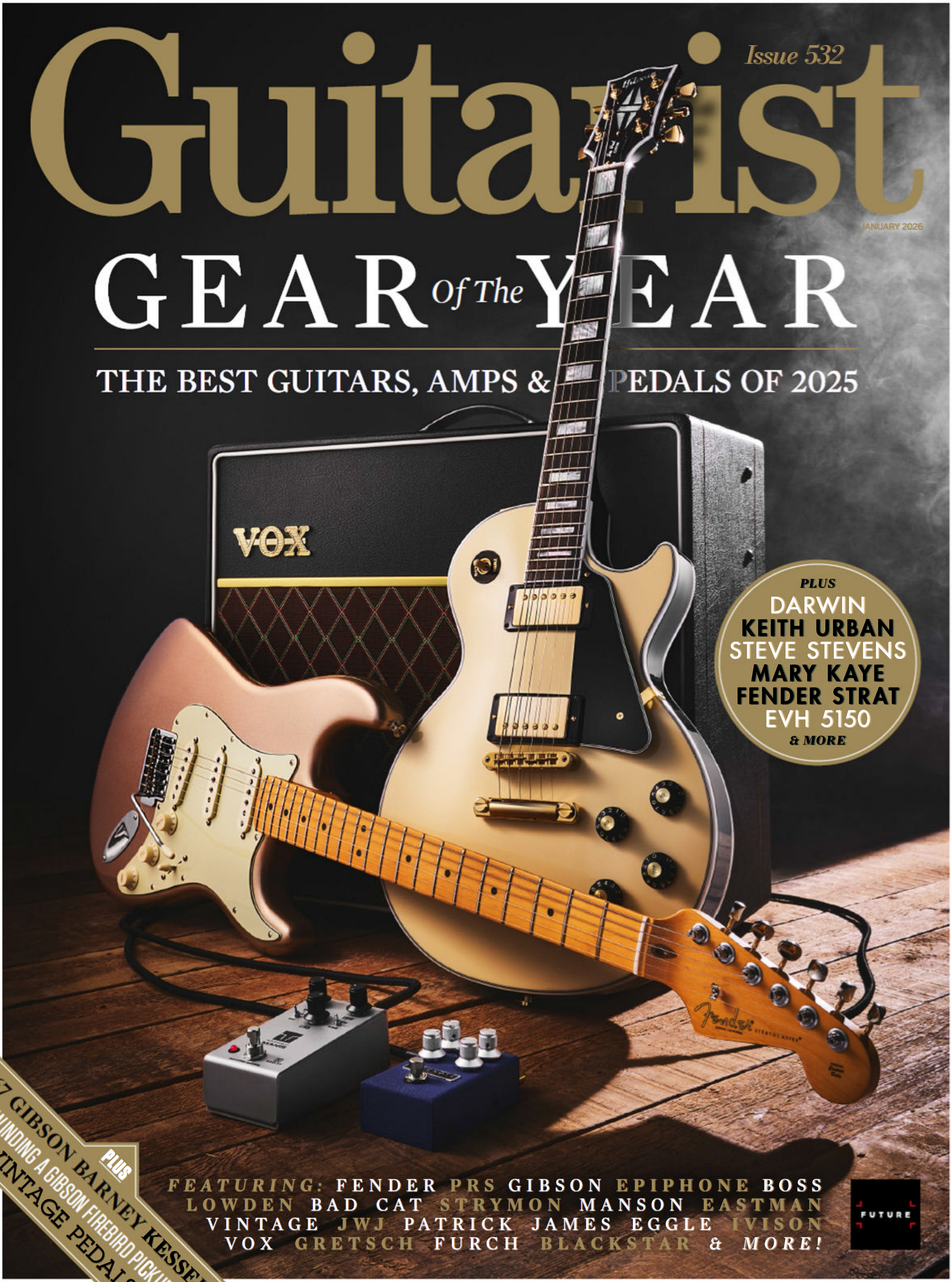
Guitarist

Issue 532
JANUARY 2026



GEAR *Of The* YEAR

THE BEST GUITARS, AMPS & PEDALS OF 2025

PLUS
DARWIN
KEITH URBAN
STEVE STEVENS
MARY KAYE
FENDER STRAT
EVH 5150
& MORE

FEATURING: FENDER PRS GIBSON EPIPHONE BOSS LOWDEN BAD CAT STRYMON MANSON EASTMAN VINTAGE JWJ PATRICK JAMES EGGLE IVISON VOX GRETSCH FURCH BLACKSTAR *& MORE!*

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Back To The Future

This month's illustrious crop of Gear Of The Year-winning guitars, amps and effects always presents an occasion to muse about where guitar is headed. Gear design is, after all, often no more than a delayed reflection of what guitar players are into at a given point in time, which is itself a reflection of what's trending in music. A few bolder companies come up with gear that embodies pure innovation every year – and they take a bigger risk, in that their work might fail to catch on. But, through their boldness, such companies ultimately drive forward the state of the art in guitar and music, which is incredibly important. And so the conflicting attractions of heritage and futurity tug at the hearts (and the purse strings) of guitarists every year and the see-saw balance of those influences defines where we're at as a community of musicians.

This year's gear represents, to me, the apex of a trend we've seen for a while now where shrewd designers bring together the best of the past in modernised, more user-friendly, capable form. Eastman's well-priced and deftly featured FullerTone guitars are a great example of that; the touchstones of inspiration may be obvious, but the end result retains an edge of originality and freshness that really inspires. Past or present, or a blend of both, it's guitarists who are the real winners in this cross-current of past and future.

On a personal note, I will be away from the mag for a couple of months after receiving a prostate cancer diagnosis – in my case, a random test caught the disease before it spread. Other men are not so lucky and find out only after the disease has progressed to an incurable stage. So permit me to urge all the guys among our dear readership to get a PSA test done, especially any who are over 40. It's easy and inexpensive to do and may just save your life. Until January, I leave you in the capable hands of deputy editor David Mead and all the team here at the mag. I look forward to greeting you again, in better health, in the New Year. Enjoy the issue and see you soon.

Jamie Dickson **Editor-in-chief**

Editor's Highlights

On The Record

Elusive, easy to get wrong and often something of a black art… Michael Watts demystifies recording acoustic guitars on **p42**

Steve Stevens

Billy Idol's long-time guitarist on gear, sessions and the perhaps surprising truth that a lot of hard rock songs start on acoustic **p48**

Keith Urban

The contemporary country king is also a certified tone-hound and his musings on gear loved and lost are an entertaining journey **p112**

COVER IMAGE BY PHIL BARKER ABOVE: RECORDING PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN STEVE STEVENS PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME KEITH URBAN PHOTO BY JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES

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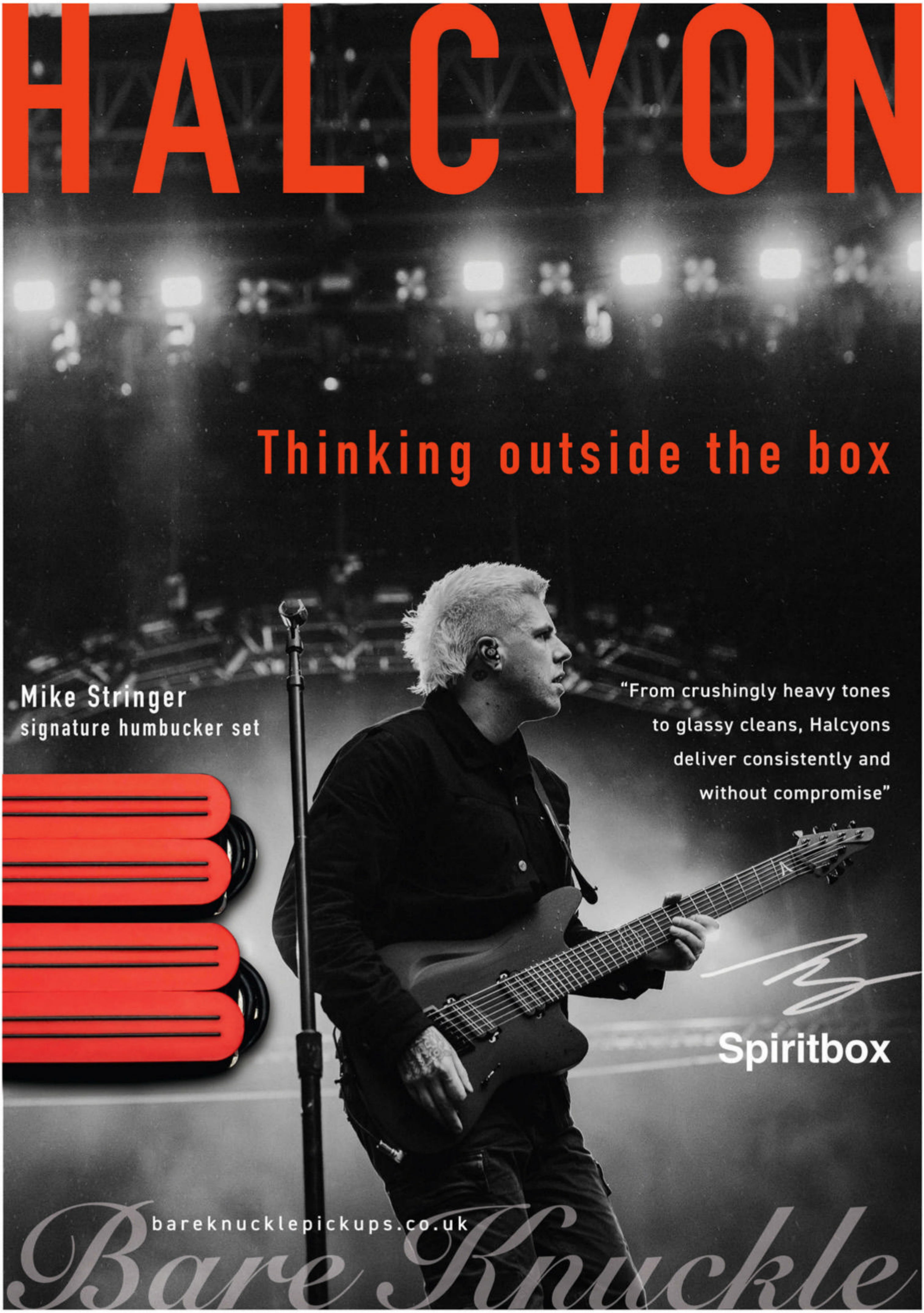

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VIDEO & AUDIO

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The Pick
SCAN TO GET THE LATEST GUITAR NEWS

The brilliant Bel Canto

The (GPHG Award-winning) FS01 chiming module in all Bel Cantos orchestrates a crystal-clear 'D' note. Every hour on the hour. Now, with a '**Lumière**' addition to the cast, you can opt for an accompanying visual extravaganza, too. A production that may have admirers talking to your wrist during the day. And a light show making it difficult to look away from at night. Bravo!

Do your research

Christopher Ward

christopherward.com

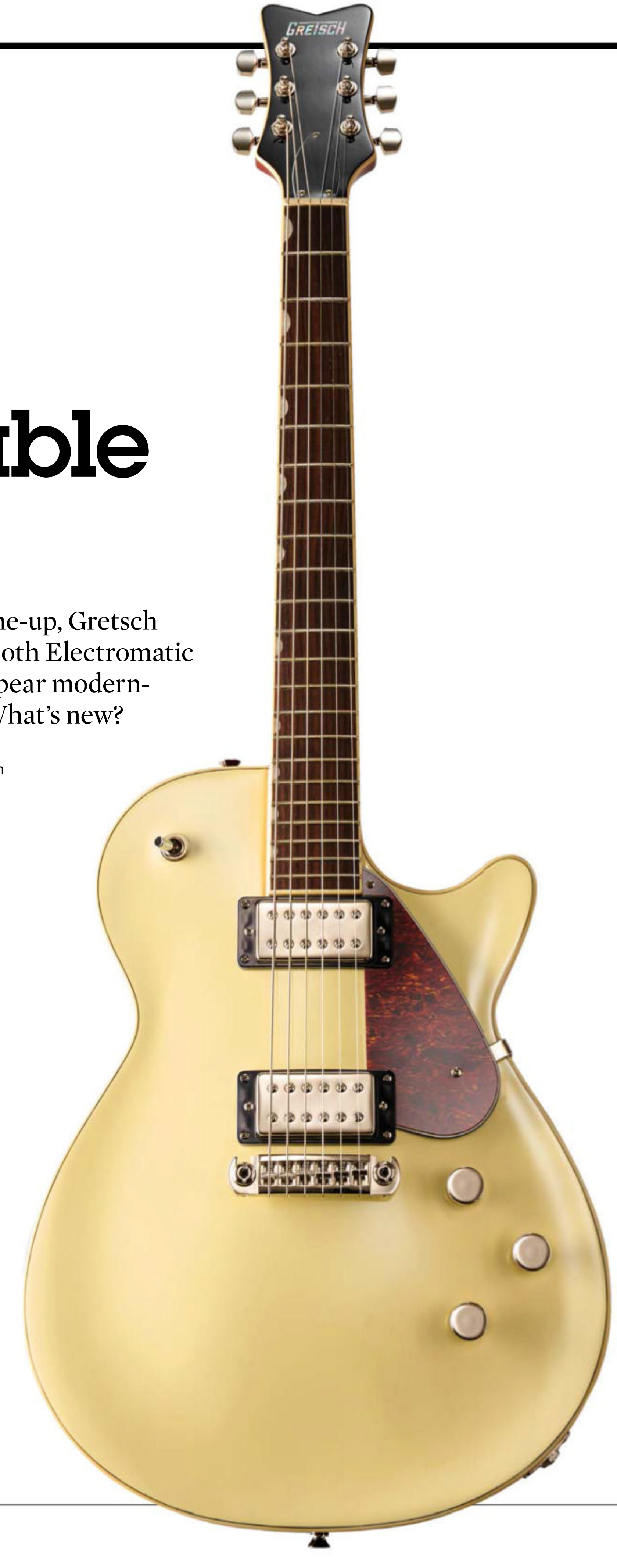
GRETSCH ELECTROMATIC JET
£609

WHAT IS IT? New Jet is "crafted for contemporary musicians seeking versatile, high-quality instruments with iconic looks and bold tone", says Gretsch. Right ho!

Affordable Flight

With plenty already in the line-up, Gretsch has released a new range of both Electromatic and Streamliner Jets that appear modern-aimed and very affordable. What's new?

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Matt Lincoln

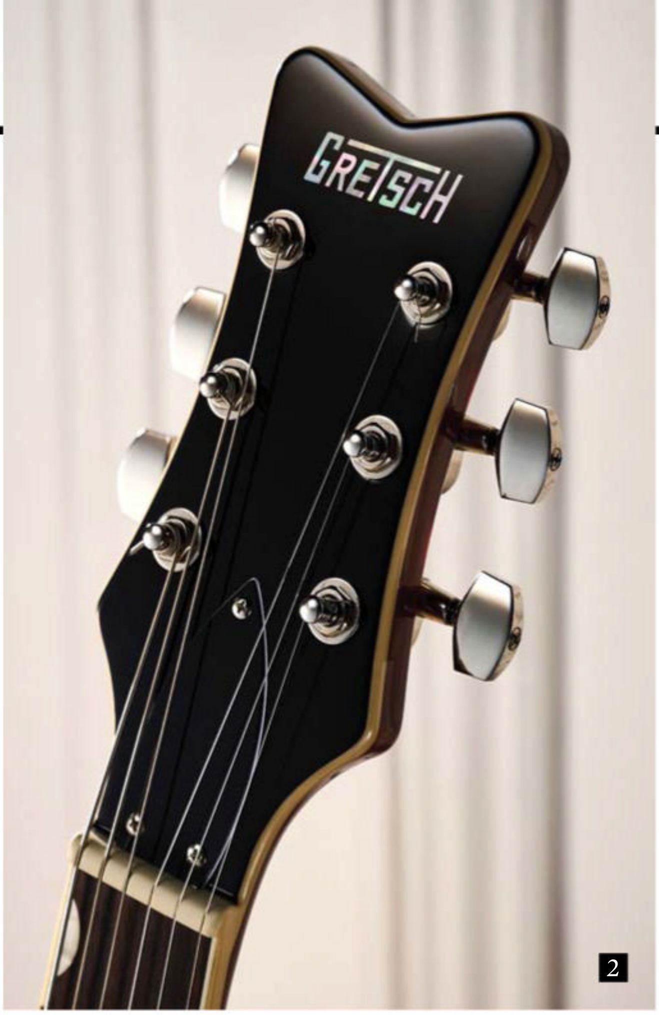


Gretsch tells us that the recently refreshed Electromatic and Streamliner Jets employ "time-tested craftsmanship and careful precision to fuel reckless creativity and untamed expression", adding that these new Jets "represent Gretsch's focused commitment to the next generation of musicians". Well, we're wondering whether we're actually allowed access to this party as we're not exactly 'the next generation', but these fresh Jets straddle both the Electromatic and lower-cost Streamliner levels, and add to a sizable number of existing Gretsch Jets.

In brief, the seven new models feature dual or single humbuckers, a one-piece wrapover bridge and a simplified three- or two-control layout. The Electromatics all have glued-in necks, the Streamliners are bolt-ons, and pricing overall runs from the top-of-the-line Electromatic Jet you see here, down to the Streamliner Jet Club 1 Pickup at £319.

As we've concluded before, Gretsch's Electromatic level is typically pretty tidy in terms of build and attention to detail. We can't see any wood under the creamy Vintage White top colour with low-contrast

1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1. Unlike the bolt-on Streamliner Jets, the neck here is glued in with a subtle rounding of the treble edge – hardly radical. We do get the new 'Performance C' neck profile and a slightly longer scale length

cream-coloured binding – apparently, it's maple – while the mahogany back and neck have a glossy translucent brown finish and you can just about see that the body is three-piece, the neck with a headstock splice and heel stack.

The body is classed as chambered, and we understand that the cavities are more fan-like than simply scooping out either side of the central area. It results in a pretty good 'solidbody' weight of 3.63kg (7.97lb). There's a little rounding at the heel, and a slight ribcage cut on the back with a smaller one on the treble side. The top is quite arched in the centre area with a gradual slope to the body edges and, along with the neat edge-binding with its inner thin black purfling line, it's tidily done. That smaller tortoiseshell-faced, teardrop-shaped raised pickguard adds a nice retro touch, too. With an overall depth of 52mm that's approximately 45mm at the rim, it's comfortably thinner than a Les Paul.

3

> This considered design irons out some of Gretsch's historic quirks and gives us a fluid playability and thicker voicing

There's no explanation as to why, but the scale length here is slightly increased from 626mm (24.56 inches) to 632mm (24.88 inches) and, more obviously, we have a very un-Jet-like 'Split-V' style headstock that's narrower than the one first shown off on the 1955 White Falcon. The single-bound fingerboard, with those classic thumbnail inlays, is rosewood not laurel (although the new Streamliner Jets still are), with a quoted 305mm (12-inch) radius.

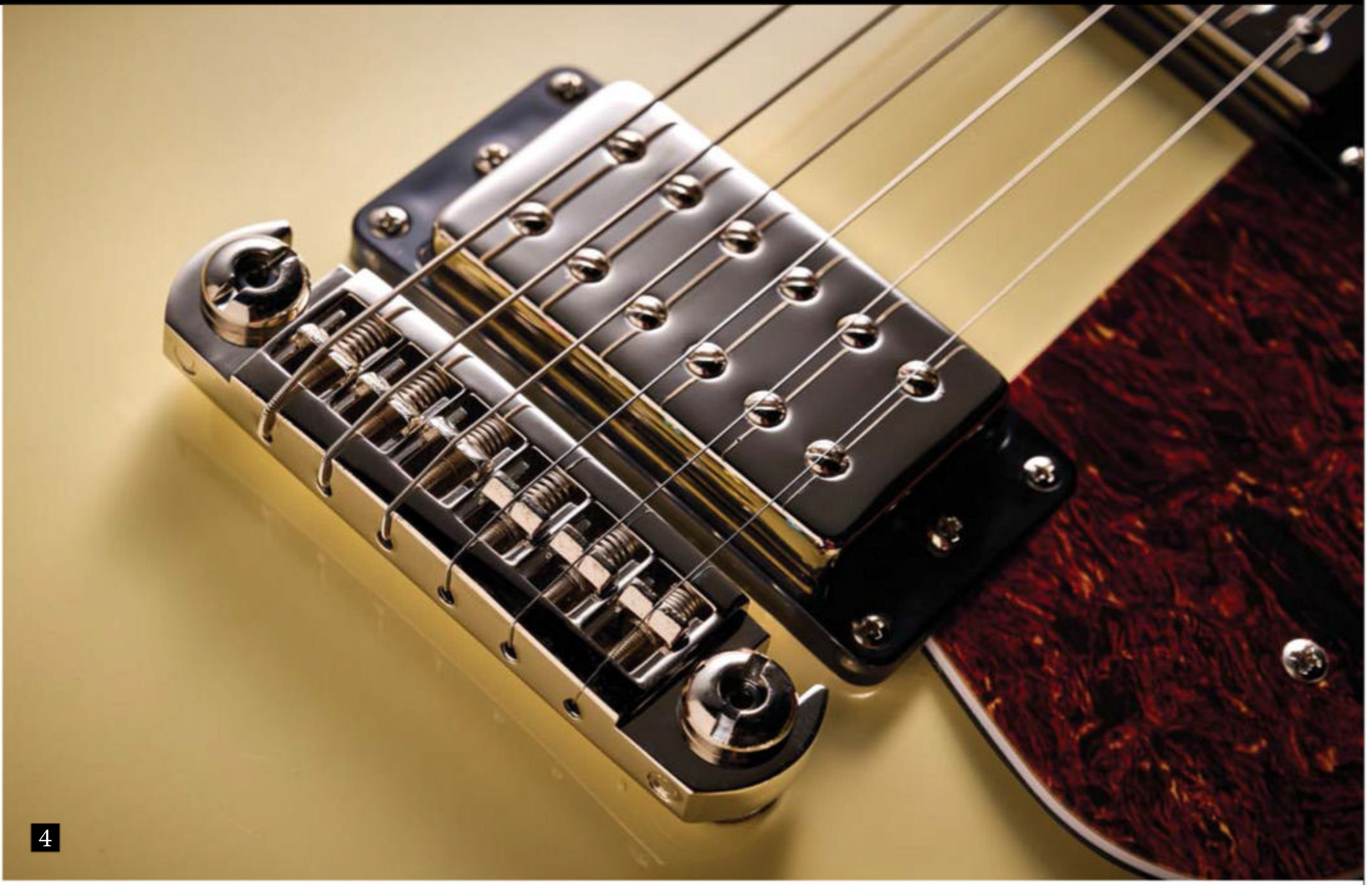
Another new addition is the adjustable-saddle wrapover Lockdown bridge with locking studs. While it looks a bit generic and fairly chunky, it's definitely an improvement in terms of adjustability and stability over a simple Les Paul Junior/ Special-style wrapover. A similar bridge is used on the Electromatic CVT double-cut that appeared earlier this year along with the Jet Two 90, but neither of those used the locking studs according to Gretsch spec.

That CVT also introduced the PureVolt Twin Six humbuckers, which appear to be more affordable versions of the Pro Twin Six 'buckers – "some of our most

2. This single-bound Split-V headstock isn't used on any other Jet models so is an immediate identifier of these new Electromatic (and Streamliner) additions. The nut is Graph Tech NuBone and pretty nicely cut

3. Named after its dual row of cross-head polepieces, the PureVolt Double Six humbuckers are yet another flavour in a long line of Gretsch pickups

4. Although not the only modern Gretsch that uses an intonatable wrapover bridge, once set, this chunky so-called Lockdown bridge can be neatly locked in place so there's no forward tilt and it doesn't drop off when you restring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modern and powerful pickups to date,” says Gretsch – that we saw earlier this year on the Broadkaster LX centre-block guitars. Obviously, the Twin Six bit comes from the Filter’Tron-like dual rows of screw polepieces, and both levels advertise an Alnico IV magnet at the neck with an Alnico V at the bridge. These use classy pickup rings that are transparent plastic with a black face and are angled to follow the string line.

There’s another variation with the control setup: along with the shoulder-placed pickup toggle switch, for each pickup we get a master volume with a tone that has a coil-splitting pull-switch.

Feel & Sounds

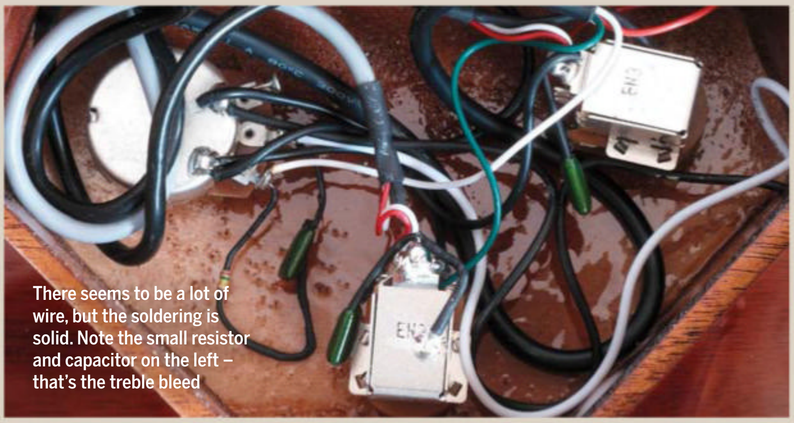
With its good weight, it’s a very manageable single-cut played seated or strapped on, and another change lies in the neck shape, a ‘Performance C’ rather than the ‘Thin U’. It has a wide spacious feel in lower position with a measured nut width of 44.25mm (and standard 35.5mm string spacing), typically measuring 21.5mm deep at the 1st fret but filling out to a slightly deeper 24.35mm by the 12th. The profile is good – quite a full ‘C’ with nicely tapered shoulders. The fretwork is rather good, too; the medium jumbo wire measures approximately 2.7mm wide by 1.1mm high with a good airy setup. The nut is cut really well, with the exception of slight snagging on the D string, quickly fixed with a couple of passes of a fret file.

UNDER THE HOOD

Gretsch promises us “advanced electronics”…

With a simpler setup than Gretsch’s Tone Pot circuit, which features individual pickup volumes, a master tone *and* an overall master volume, the new Jet drops the fourth control and goes for master volume with individual pickup tone controls. Each pot has an A (audio) taper and all three have a nominal value of 500kohms. There’s a treble bleed circuit on the volume that uses a 250k resistor in series with a 6,800pF (0.0068μF) capacitor, while both tone caps are 0.022μF. Many might find the individual tones a little unnecessary, not least that (from what we hear at output) the pickups are far from overbright – but they do allow each humbucker to be individually split, voicing the neck-facing coil of each, which are hum-cancelling with both on.

Aside from the magnets (Alnico IV at the neck, V at the bridge) and plain enamel wire, we’re told little about the wax-potted PureVolt Twin Six humbuckers, except that they’re “beautifully dynamic, exceptionally expressive and addictively powerful”. DCRs tell us the bridge is 11.5k (5.78k when split) and the neck is 7.08k (3.58k), but that says little about the actual sound, as we discuss.


There seems to be a lot of wire, but the soldering is solid. Note the small resistor and capacitor on the left – that’s the treble bleed

5. Good to see a plated metal jack plate here that's way more rugged for the gigging musician over a plastic plate. One less thing to go wrong!

6. They might not feature the 'G arrow' motifs, but otherwise they're classic Gretsch. Each of the individual tone controls has a pull-switch to split each pickup, too

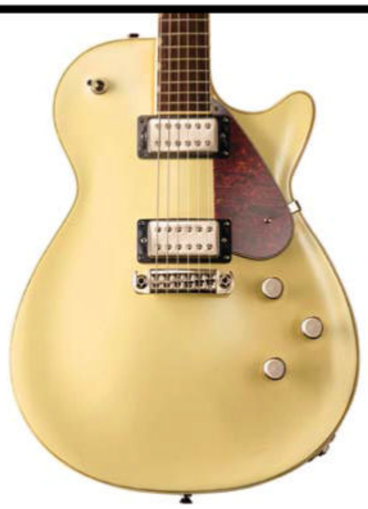
In humbucking mode at the bridge we're greeted with a good subtly thicker Patent Applied For voice that has classic honk and a slightly rounded, less crisp high-end, certainly when compared with our T-Type-equipped Gibson Les Paul Classic. The neck (placed the same distance from the strings as the bridge for our initial test) actually sounds louder, a little fuller and again has that subtly less crisp high-end. It's actually quite classy, and the splits are good, especially when one pickup is split with the other in full humbucker mode in the middle position. Crank up the volume and it does 'big clean' rather well, not least with a little volume reduction, which lightens the sound. To be honest, though, there's barely any 'Gretsch' to the sounds we hear, although with both pickups on and split you can fudge that classic rockabilly snap. Overall, it's less bright and attacking than our TV Jones Classic-equipped PRS S2 single-cut semi-hollow reference.

Kicking in some brighter-edged overdrive, it works well with quite a muscular voice at the bridge but not overdone in the midrange. The more vintage-y neck with the same overdriven sound is more hollowed and, again, just sounds rounder, a little darker in comparison with our references.

So, by design, a pretty different-from-classic Gretsch voicing. And while some might prefer a little more crispness, that's personal taste. On the whole, this is a pretty musical though not over-rock-voiced single-cut.

Verdict

For a model that was introduced back in 1953 as Gretsch's answer to the Les Paul, the Jet certainly has some legs. Gretsch might want to reposition this new mini-refresh as something for a next generation, but there's nothing here that's radical, let alone modern. But all of that is in its favour: it's a considered design that irons out some of Gretsch's historic quirks, not least to the control circuit, and gives us a great neck shape, fluid playability and thicker voicing, while retaining historical motifs such as the Falcon-inspired headstock, which is new to the Jet, and those thumbnail inlays. A class act that is also a great chassis to upgrade and voice as you like. Long live the Jet!



GRETSCH ELECTROMATIC JET

PRICE: £609
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Single-cutaway chambered body electric
BODY: Chambered mahogany with maple top
NECK: Mahogany, 'Performance C' profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.88")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech NuBone/44.25mm
FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, pearloid Neo-Classic thumbnail inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Lockdown locking wrapover bridge, enclosed tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Covered Gretsch PureVolt Twin Six humbuckers with 12 adjustable screw poles per pickup, 3-way toggle pickup selector, master volume, individual pickup tone controls w/ pull-switch coil-splits (hum-cancelling in middle position)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.63/7.97
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: In the new Jet Electromatic line-up there's also the twin-pickup, all-mahogany Jet Club (£549), plus the Jet Club 1 Pickup (£509). The lower-tier Streamliner range has dual- and single-pickup versions of the Jet (£409 and £359) and the Jet Club (£359 and £319)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model
FINISH: Vintage White (as reviewed), Bristol Fog, Dark Cherry Metallic, Cadillac Green – gloss polyester

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01342 331700
www.gretschguitars.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Classic style; smartly built with a good 'solidbody' weight; the rock-solid Lockdown bridge; well voiced with wide stylistic range from big cleans to muscular-sounding gains

CONS Aside from a minor D string nut slot that was snagging the string, this one was ready to rock; we'd welcome a little more Filter'Tron clarity

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FIRST PLAY

EVH 5150 ICONIC SERIES 15W EL34 HEAD

£589

WHAT IS IT? Compact two-channel, high-gain amp head with switchable full 15 watts to quarter-power output

The King's Head

The bombastic benchmark of the 'brown' sound has been channelled through a single-ended EL34 power section and hybrid preamp, with significant volume and price savings

Words Martin Smith **Photography** Phil Barker

Five years ago the guitar world lost Edward Van Halen, a leading light and sonic visionary who shattered the glass ceilings of gear, technique and music itself. We are left with a legacy not only of his songs but also the innovative products he helped create.

Back when Ed was developing his legendary 'brown' sound, which can be heard on the Roth-era Van Halen albums from '78 to '84, high-gain amplifiers didn't exist. His techniques for squeezing out new levels of rich saturation without pedal assistance have influenced the amplifiers that now bear his initials.

While some celebrity endorsers may be happy to lease their name simply for a kickback, Edward was not that guy. His critical perfectionism is lore among many techs and designers, such as Chip Ellis at Fender and James Brown at Peavey. Indeed, Edward was known to leave a guitar feeding back on top of a dimed amp for days at a

5150
ICONIC

5150
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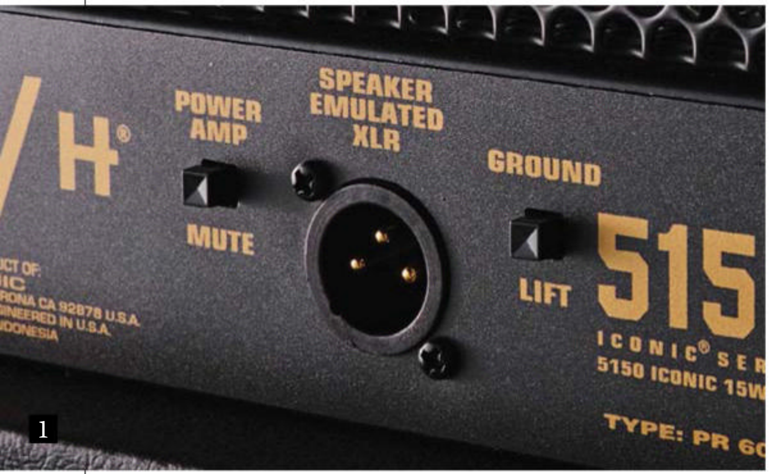
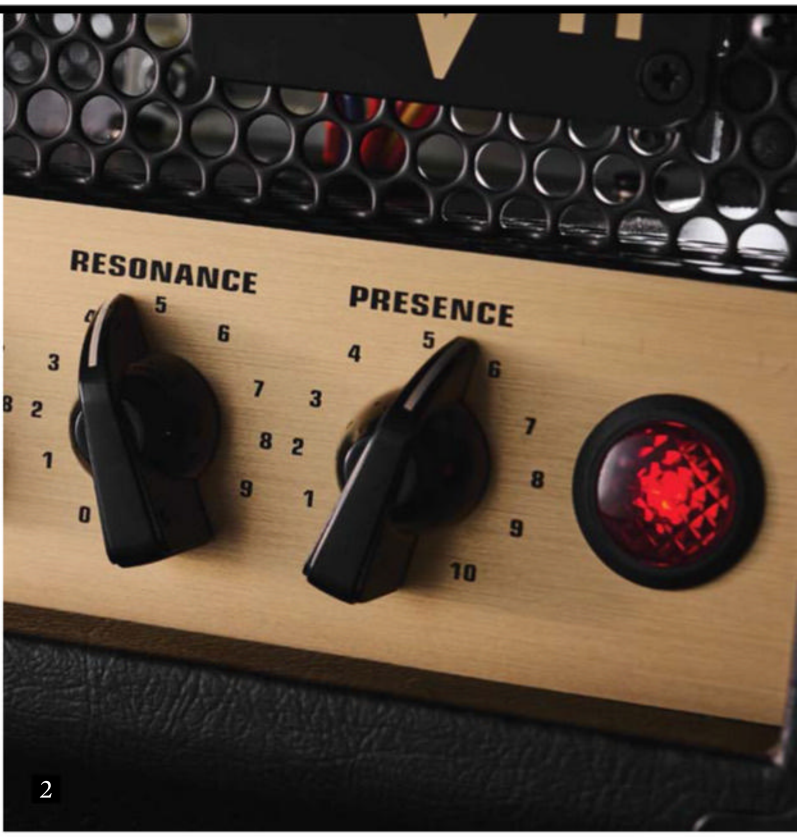
EQ
MID
HIGH
ONE
VOLUME
TWO
BOOST
REVERB
RESONANCE
PRESENCE

1. The speaker-emulated XLR output has a profile based on the EVH speaker cabinets. The Power Amp Mute switch enables the amp to be used with or without a speaker cab, for silent stage use and speakerless recording

2. The brushed-gold faceplate sets off the black-coated steel chassis featuring the 5150 and EVH nameplates. The design belies the budget-oriented purpose of this model. The EL34 models feature the gold tint and the 6L6 models are silver

3. The Power Level switch featured here was originally pioneered by Edward Van Halen in the 70s by his use of an industrial variable transformer called a Variac, allowing for voltage reduction and hence volume reduction





time for stress-testing purposes! As such, the EVH range is built with this 'military-spec' ethos at its core.

The original 5150, developed alongside amp designer James Brown, was released in 1992 and has become what is widely considered as a default 'best-in-class' high-gain amp head. With a Soldano-influenced preamp achieving high levels of modern gain, the 5150 amps come in two main flavours – EL34 and 6L6 variations. The 6L6 power valves are used to provide clean bold power, whereas the EL34-equipped models tend to produce a little more midrange growl, especially when pushed hard. It has since been released in a variety of versions, sizes and wattages while largely retaining its sonic DNA.

The Iconic series came out in 2021, bringing the 5150 sound to those with more modest budgets by replacing the huge array of preamp valves with a hybrid preamp circuit composed of valves and solid-state technology. Construction-wise, the head has a well-made, robust feel, although there are subtle clues to its lower price point.

'Speakerless recording' and 'direct to PA' use on silent stages are both provided for with the speaker-emulated XLR output and power amp mute switch. The rear panel is also graced with an effects loop, which is not only to be used as a portal for your time-based effects but also as an input for any other already preamplified signal to access the power section, footswitchable boost, reverb, resonance, presence and Power Level switch – great for modellers and pedal-based preamps. Finally, the aforementioned Power Level switch toggles between two settings: the full 15 watts and quarter power. At this lower setting, every ounce of goodness is preserved but at levels unlikely to aggrieve those around you.

Sounds

Selecting Channel 1, which is signalled by a green LED, it sounds articulate and transparent enough (but admittedly, it's not usually the main selling point of this style of amp – see Beyond The 'Brown' Sound box, below). While it doesn't seem to nod to any specific historic amplifiers, it has an even response with clean, deep lows and plenty of sparkle, making it an ideal partner to the high-gain channel.

We also have a front-panel overdrive button to bring mid-gain levels of drive to this channel, providing some chunky overdrive and sustain. Reaching for the digitally derived reverb, we're met with a heavily pre-delayed short spring-type sound. Possibly not the most inspiring reverb we've encountered, but it will certainly provide a halo around your notes.

Switching to the main course, Channel 2, the roaring gain hits you instantly. This amp can scream with all the power Edward's legacy demands, but the sustain and definition also grab your ear and indeed your pick. There's a familiar chewiness to the notes and a slight but helpful sculpting to the midrange, eliminating any boxiness. Tight palm-

BEYOND THE 'BROWN' SOUND

Richard Hawley has proved that fantastic clean tones can be summoned from this fire-breathing gain-monster

"I got my own 5150 in '97 or '98," Richard remembers. "I met Eddie in '98 in Germany – it was a lovely experience and very funny. He couldn't get his head round the fact I used his amp for a clean sound – that particular version of the 5150 is a superb amplifier that I still have along with the 4x12 cab – so he wrote all my settings down while shaking his head. My amp head had a faulty valve because it had been thrown around at airports and endless load-ins and load-outs. Eddie arranged for me to use one of his spares, which was off-the-scale generous. I had mine repaired and sent him his back!

"I used that amp on all my first three solo albums exclusively, and occasionally my Selmer Zodiac, but 99 per cent they were all done on that 5150.

"It's a very long time ago, but I remember that he was a genuinely lovely guy."

3
POWER
ON
OFF
STANDBY
ON
OFF
POWER LEVEL
FULL
1/4
230V~50Hz
120W
EVH
A PRODUCT OF FMIC
311 CESSNA CIRCLE, CORONA CA 92878 U.S.A.
DESIGNED AND ENGINEERED IN U.S.A.
MADE IN INDONESIA

muted riffs are a 5150 party piece, and this amp is every bit the generous host, just like its larger forebears.

The presence and resonance further boost the clarity and loudness without harshness or excessive whomp. The gain range has a sweet spot somewhere between 4 and 6, where the percussive grab and sustain meet a good balance, pickups depending.

The architecture of this amp is worth a mention at this point, too, since we're getting more power-section saturation here than in the higher-powered versions, both EL34 and 6L6 variants. In the preamp section, and in keeping with all the Iconic models, we find a hybrid of solid-state and valve gain. Purists, stay cool: all the classic 5150 tones are present.

The Burn button engages the additional voicing for the second channel, yielding even more full-bodied richness along with a good dash more of saturation. Genuinely glorious to play, this Burn function brings us a little closer to the full-tilt of the eight ECC83-loaded flagship 5150 model, allowing those legato runs and pick harmonics to fly.

The EQ section, used by both channels, has well-chosen ranges but has a nicely balanced tone with controls around 6 for our humbucker-equipped super-S. We enjoyed the extra focus and definition on tap via higher settings of the middle control, too. The Resonance control dialled in that solid bottom-end often necessary for contemporary heavy styles; Presence, unsurprisingly, adds the sparkle but without any harshness or brittleness. Behind the scenes, a helpful noise gate has been cleverly integrated to tighten up the response accordingly at high levels of gain and more so when the Burn function is deployed.

> Tight palm-muted riffs are a 5150 party piece, and this amp is every bit the generous host

Our solo flights are given wings with the level-adjustable footwitchable gain boost, placed post effects loop, which is one of the many facilities that positions this amp just as much for stage use as it does for studio and home use.

Verdict

All the grin-inducing firepower of the full-flight EVH 5150 is packed inside this stripped-down model, though with subtle differences that (while maybe appreciable only to those very familiar with the original) don't detract from the classic tone. Indeed, the slight extra power-section growl adds back a little warmth that may have been affected by the hybrid solid-state/valve preamp design.

The wide-ranging features, from the footswitchable boost to the speaker emulated output, will certainly have you covered for most eventualities. If you, like many players, find 15 watts (or even the quarter-power setting) hits a sweet spot in the loudness department, then this tribute to a legend is worthy of your attention. G

EVH 5150 ICONIC SERIES 15W EL34 HEAD

PRICE: £589
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: 15W valve head
VALVES: 2x ECC83S, 1x EL34
OUTPUT: 15W to 4W via ¼-power switch
DIMENSIONS: 508 (w) x 254 (d) x 242mm (h)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 10/22
CABINET: MDF
CHANNELS: 2 plus boost
CONTROLS: Gain, Volume and voicing switch (Overdrive and Burn) per channel; Low, Mid, High shared EQ, Boost volume, Reverb, Resonance, Presence
FOOTSWITCH: Supplied 2-button for channel selection and boost
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Speaker emulated XLR
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Other EL34 EVH models include the 80W head (£819), 15W 1x10 and 40W 1x12 combos (£649 and £819), plus 4x12 cabinet (£499)

Fender Musical Instruments EMEA
01342 331700
www.evhgear.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Rich 'brown'-sounding overdrive from mild to wild; full feature set for home, studio or live; quarter-power output reduction

CONS The reverb perhaps isn't the greatest example; a cover would be nice; the footswitch cable is a little short for stage use

FIRST PLAY

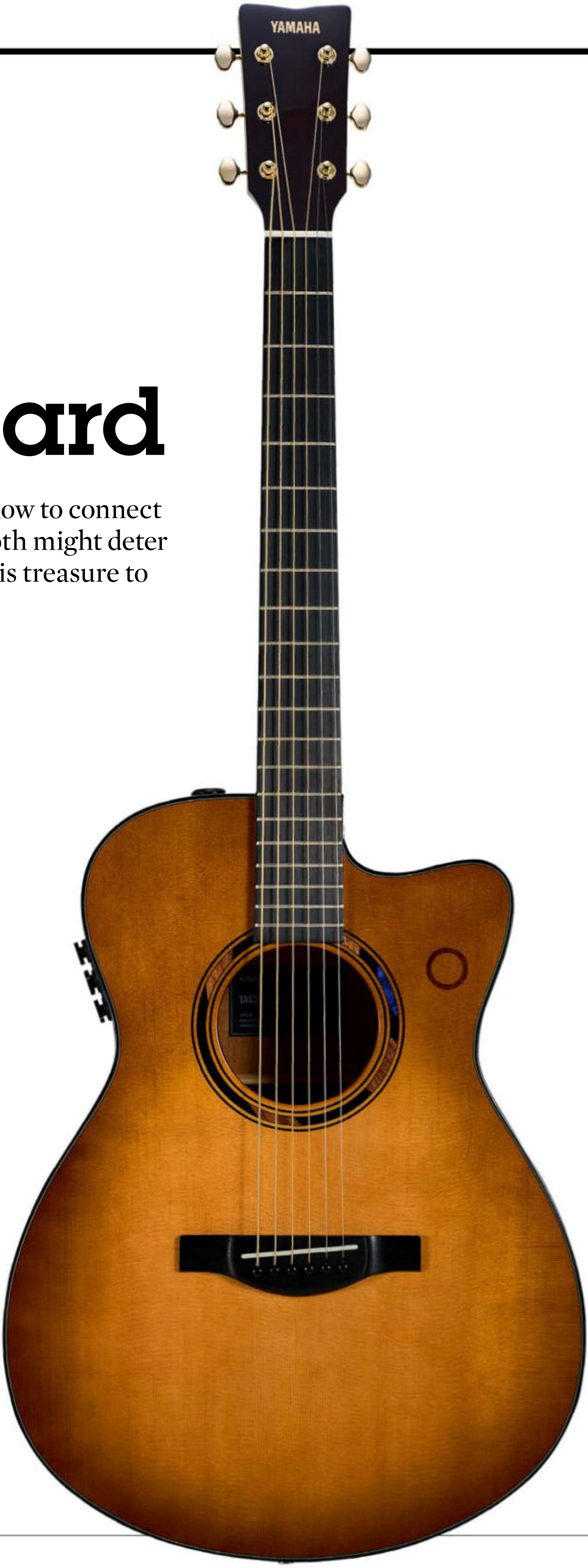
YAMAHA TAS3 C
£1,393

WHAT IS IT? Yamaha's TransAcoustic technology in a compact cutaway concert-sized body shape

All Aboard

Reading a manual to find out how to connect your acoustic guitar to Bluetooth might deter some traditionalists, but there is treasure to be found for the adventurous

Words David Mead **Photography** Matt Lincoln



Yamaha will shortly be celebrating 10 years since it introduced its first TransAcoustic guitar at Summer NAMM in 2016, back when the guitar world circled the new technology with great suspicion. Was this a novelty? A passing phase? Or could it be seen as a serious instrument that might find space on a professional stage? After all, an acoustic guitar that could generate its own reverb and chorus without any external effects being called into play seemed like some kind of a bizarre magic trick. But it worked. And the sound it produced was simply uncanny. That same guitar world listened and ultimately nodded in approval.

Since then, the technology that was turning heads a decade ago has been reworked to include more onboard effects in the shape of delay and, unbelievably, a fully functioning looper. Furthermore, the effects are now all editable via an app – the TAG Remote – that connects to your guitar via Bluetooth and enriches the nature of the effects by offering control over parameters and reverb types.

So how does it work? Is there some sort of dark art at play here? Let's let the boffins at Yamaha explain: "Two actuators installed on the inner surface of the guitar resonate in response to the vibrations of the strings," they tell us. "The vibrations generated by the actuators are then transmitted to the body of the guitar and to the air in and

1. With all the technology safely stowed away inside, the TAS3 C looks like a perfectly normal concert-sized acoustic. Only the sensor on the front, for controlling the onboard looper, suggests otherwise

around it. This results in authentic reverb, chorus and delay sounds that actually radiate from within the body."

We've encountered TransAcoustic guitars in the past, and spending time with the technology won us over. It really is something that you need to hear for yourself to appreciate – and a good place to start is by searching online for the video that Yvette Young did for Yamaha, demonstrating the TAS3 C's looper. We'll eat our hat if you're not impressed.

But, of course, this clever stuff is all well and good, but what about the guitar that's playing host to Yamaha's cunning? It's clear the company knows a thing or two about making top-notch guitars and so expectations here are very high before we've even played a chord.

The guitar just has that look about it, with a subtle sunburst to its nicely figured Sitka spruce top. And the rest of the construction details spell out a quality build, too, with mahogany for the back and sides, the grain of which is all but obscured by the dark finish. The mahogany theme continues with the TAS3's neck, which is topped off with some very nice-looking open-backed tuners.

Turning the guitar over, the fretwork on the ebony 'board is right up to standard with an expertly cut nut and very well-finished frets. The face of the fretboard is left plain, without any position markers, but pearloid dots along its edge will aid navigation more than adequately. If you're curious about what the circular inlay below the soundhole is, it's all to do with the looping function – and it's time to start exploring that and the other onboard effects right about now.

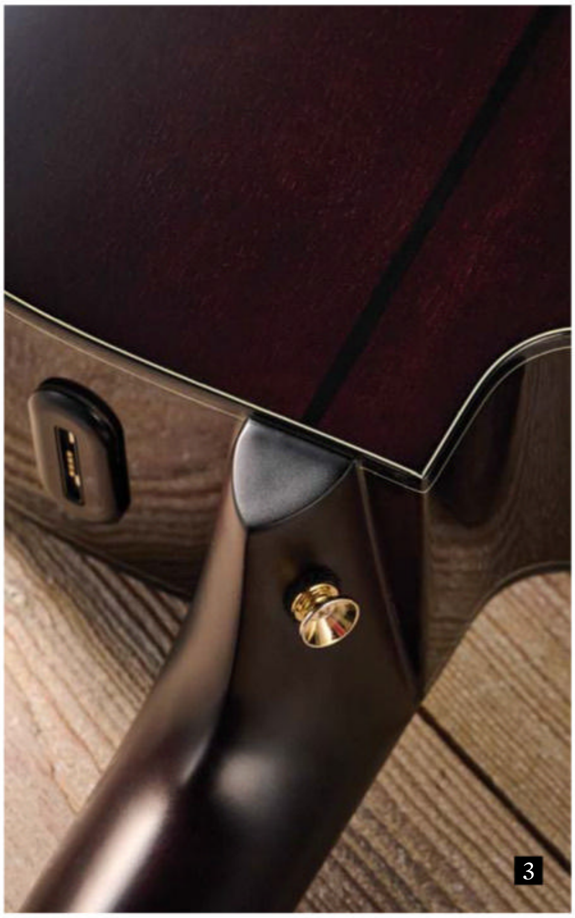
The inner workings of the instrument that generate the effects are hidden inside. And instead of the usual volume and tone controls that would be mounted on a

2. The guitar's top is Sitka spruce that has been treated with Yamaha's ARE (Acoustic Resonance Enhancement) tech to simulate ageing

3. The charging port for the internal rechargeable battery is located on the guitar's upper bout near the neck joint

4. As well as all the scientific wonders within, the guitar has been decked out with some very nice furnishings, including these fine looking open-backed tuners

5. The headstock might say 'business as usual' but hearing fully fledged reverb, chorus, delay and looping come through the soundhole is quite a shock to the system!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5

The reverb is an immediate favourite, giving it a very professional, produced sheen

standard electro-acoustic, there is a port for the rechargeable battery on the upper bout near the neck joint and a control panel to take command of the effects. These comprise reverb, delay, chorus and looper around a central on/off button.

However, a couple of the controls have a secondary function – for instance, you hold the reverb button to put the looper into standby mode, then begin playing and tap the circular inlay to stop recording. Pressing the chorus button will stop playback. This might sound like a faff for an acoustic player who may be used to just plugging in, setting a volume level and getting on with it, but electric players will feel at home as plenty of effects units on the market have similar multi-functional controls. And while it may not seem intuitive, spending a short while with the helpful – and delightfully clear – manual will set you straight.

6

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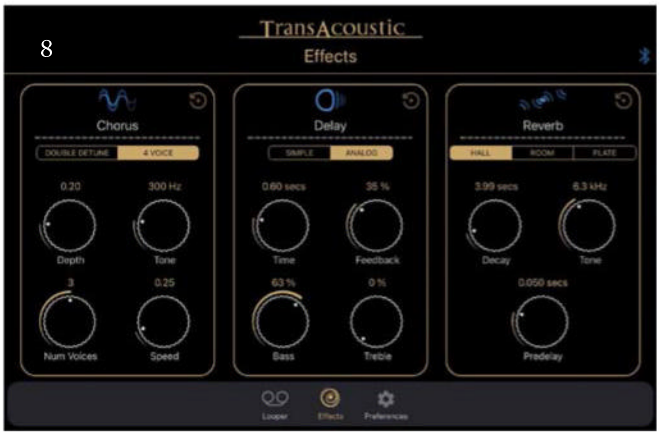


Chorus: 4 VOICE
Depth 0.20
Tone 300 Hz
Num Voices 3
Speed 0.25

Delay: ANALOG
Time 0.60 secs
Feedback 35 %
Bass 63 %
Treble 0 %

Reverb: HALL
Decay 3.99 secs
Tone 6.3 kHz
Predelay 0.050 secs

Apart from the effects, the TAS3 has a built-in tuner and a battery level indicator to ensure you know when you need to top up the power. Another thing that is common with much of today's guitar tech is Bluetooth connectivity. Once you've downloaded Yamaha's TAG Remote app, you merely press-and-hold the looper button to get connected. Once again, this might deter a few technophobes, but the benefits of connecting to the app are, by all accounts, worth it because it gives you the opportunity to customise your effects levels, swap reverb types, recall loops and so on.

It goes without saying that investing a little time scaling the slight learning curve involved here will lead to exploiting the instrument's capabilities to the full. And that sounds like time well spent to us.

Feel & Sounds

Returning our attention to the instrument, the TAS3 feels good straight out of its Yamaha-badged custom hard bag. The only thing that would lead you to suspect that the guitar itself is not the full story is the slight increase in weight – a tad more than you'd expect from a standalone acoustic.

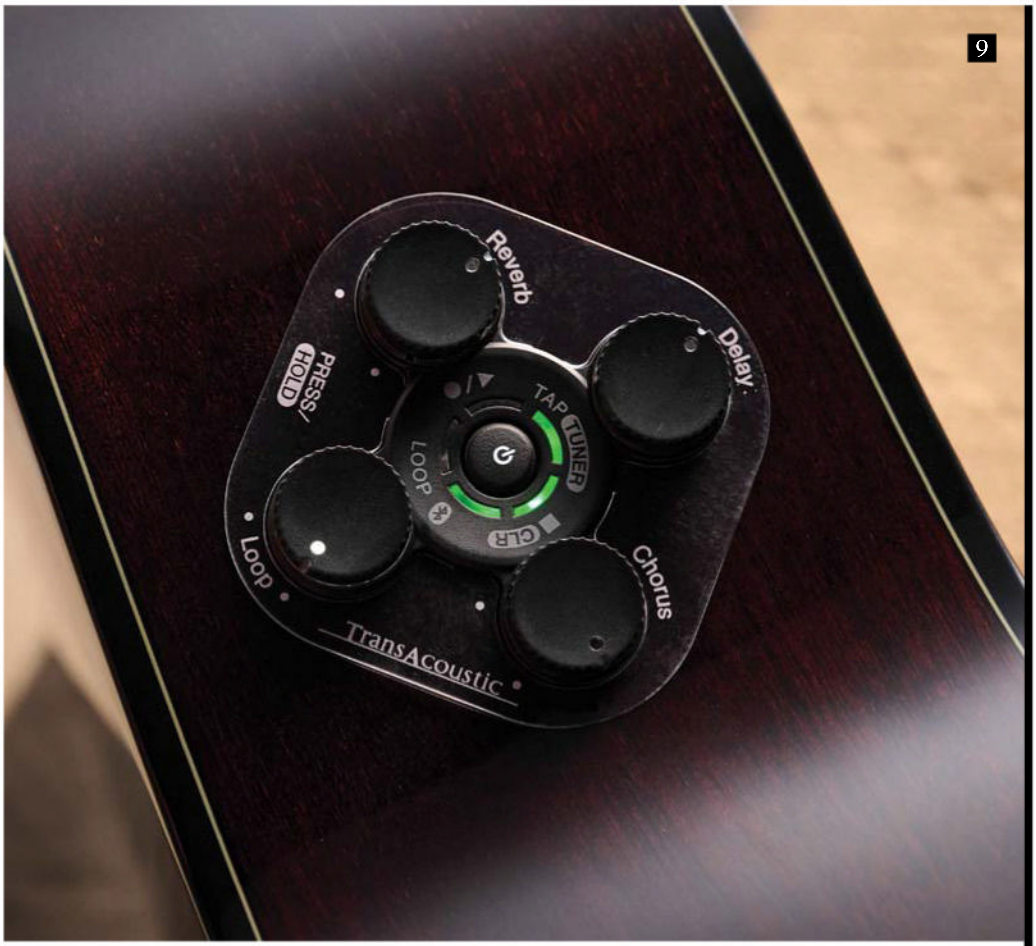
The neck is a plentiful C profile and very comfortable in the hand and, despite

6. Apart from the Sitka spruce top, other construction details comprise mahogany for the back and sides, a mahogany neck with an ebony 'board and a cutaway for players who want to journey up the dusty end

7. A sneaky look at the magic inside that fires up the onboard effects. Whereas they certainly add weight to the guitar, the TAS3 remains well balanced in use

8. The TAG Remote app is available for both iOS and Android and, once connected via Bluetooth, allows fine-tuning of all the onboard effects

9. The control panel allows access to the effects and, while some buttons are dual-function and definitely take a while to get used to, the manual is crystal clear and will put you on the correct course in no time



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the heft of the body, balance is good, both sitting and standing. Exploratory chordal strums reveal a sweet sound with a good mix of treble and bass.

Concert-bodied acoustics tend to avoid an inclination towards the boominess sometimes found on their bigger-bodied counterparts and that's very much the case here. Fingerpicking sounds good, too, and so we were particularly interested to hear what the electronic side of the guitar adds to the picture.

Navigating through the effects is a simple task. The reverb is an immediate favourite for what it adds to the sound-picture, giving it a very professional, produced sheen. Chorus on an acoustic is very much a Marmite situation: you either love it or hate it. Yet here it offers additional depth and shimmer to strummed chords. Delay does exactly what it says, layering even more production value to the overall output, and the looper (once you've acquired the knack of hitting the circular sensor on time to switch off record mode) provides even more functionality.

Employing the app means that the reverb can be switched between Hall, Room or Plate, delay settings can be fine-tuned, and so on. In fact, everything here is set for a player to either sit in the living room with a wonderfully produced-sounding acoustic or even attend an open mic night and play in front of a mic and achieve a similar pro effect.

It plays well on its own with the electronic side adding a bonus on top

Verdict

Whereas you may feel that the whole TransAcoustic thing is a novelty item and not aimed at being a serious performance tool, we'd urge you to put aside any of the preconceptions you might have and try one. Yamaha has really thought the whole situation through admirably with an acoustic that sounds and plays really well on its own, with the electronic side of things adding a functional bonus on top.

A fully produced pro-sounding acoustic in your living room without having to daisy-chain effects or lug amps about all for a smidge under £1,400? As a practice tool alone, that's well worth the ticket price. But master the magic within and the sky's the limit.

YAMAHA TAS3 C

PRICE: £1,393 (inc hard bag)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Concert cutaway
TOP: Sitka spruce with ARE treatment
BACK/SIDES: Mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 115mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 380mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 650mm (25.6")
TUNERS: Open gear Champagne-Gold
NUT/WIDTH: Urea/44mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony
FRETS: 20
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony/54mm
ELECTRICS: TransAcoustic (System 76) with reverb, chorus, delay, looper, line out vol, tap sensor. Bluetooth audio facility and downloadable iOS/Android compatible TAG Remote app for parameter editing
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.6/5.9
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The current TransAcoustic range also includes the dreadnought TAG3 C (£1,399)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Natural (as reviewed), Sand Burst – gloss with matt neck

Yamaha
0344 811 1116
https://uk.yamaha.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Well-built, great-sounding acoustic with top-class effects to take your playing to the pro realm

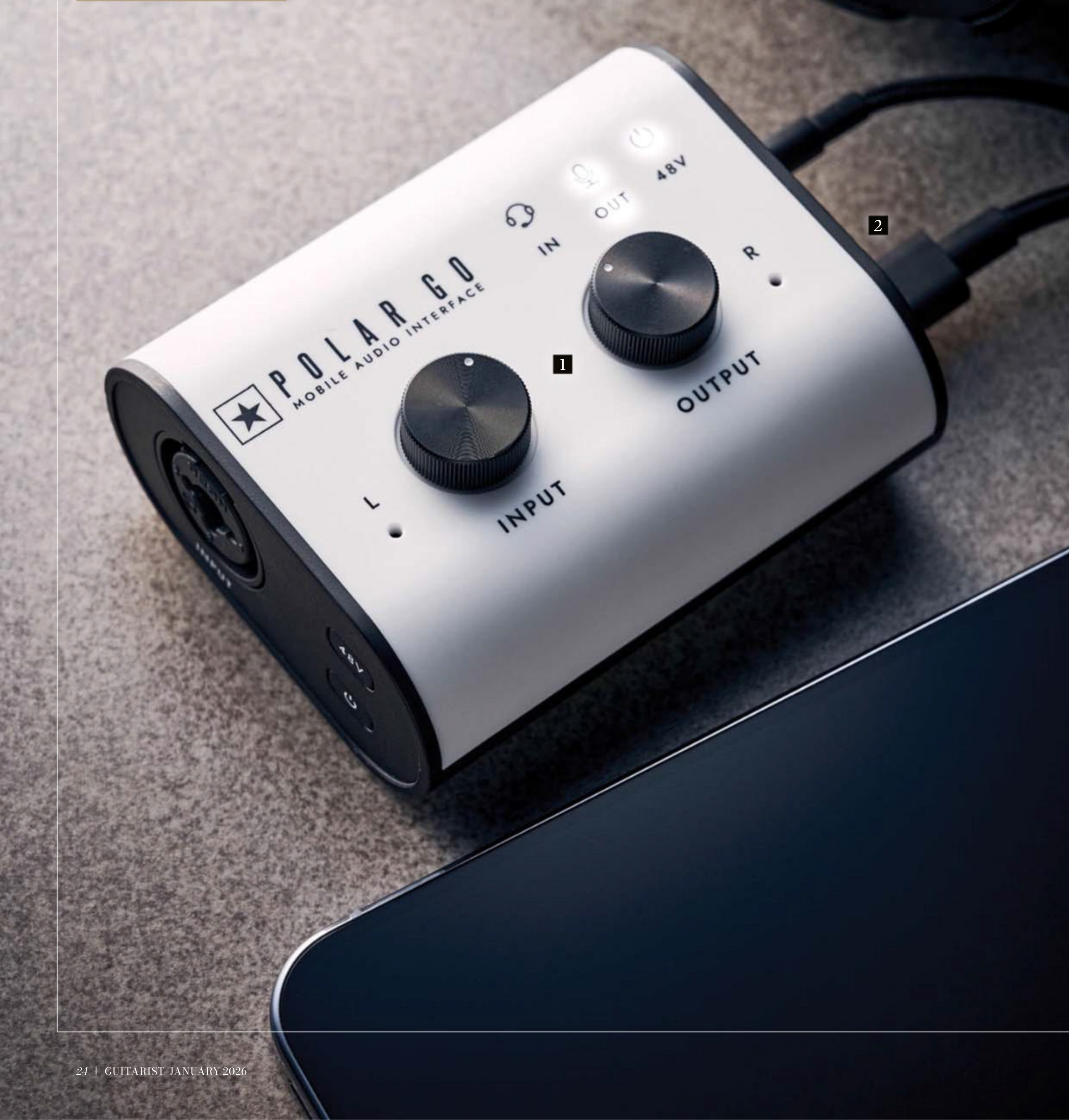
CONS There's a learning curve; some players won't be convinced

POLAR GO
MOBILE AUDIO INTERFACE
IN
OUT
48V
L
R
INPUT
OUTPUT

BLACKSTAR POLAR GO

£79

WHAT IS IT? A highly compact audio interface with built-in mics that works well with phones


POLAR GO
MOBILE AUDIO INTERFACE
IN
OUT
48V
L
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INPUT
OUTPUT
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2

Go Getter

Blackstar's palm-sized audio interface is a godsend for players who want better audio on their phone-recorded videos

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Phil Barker

1. Physical control knobs for Input and Output levels are handy, but you'll need the accompanying app to access and edit things like EQ and reverb settings, routing options and more
2. There are two USB-C sockets on one end of the Polar Go: one is for recharging the unit's internal battery and the other is for audio connectivity with phones and other devices
3. A combi jack on the other end of the unit allows you to use XLR and standard instrument cables to input audio into the Polar Go

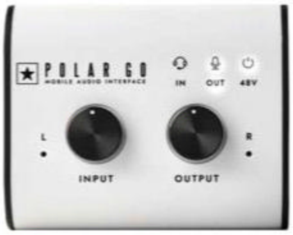
Players who like to record videos for social media on their phones will know that the in-built mics aren't the best at capturing great guitar sounds. That's why the Polar Go mobile audio interface by Blackstar is a welcome little addition to its range of audio interfaces, especially at well under £100, as its main job is to help you capture pro-quality audio that's auto-sync'd to your phone videos.

The Polar Go is built around a pair of high-quality mics housed inside the unit's palm-size casing (though there's no obvious grille or aperture for them to 'hear' through), but there's also a combi jack input for either XLR or standard instrument cables. Between these two inputs, the Polar Go can be used to record everything from acoustic guitars to electric bass, vocals, keys and more – and can also provide 48 volts of phantom power to mics that need it. The Polar Go can run off either its own rechargeable internal battery or draw power from your phone, computer or mobile device when connected to one via the USB-C connection port.

We'd wager that most *Guitarist* readers will want to use the Polar Go to record acoustic guitars via the built-in mics, or perhaps electric guitar sounds from a modelling device or amp simulator plugged into the combi jack input. Either way, we'd recommend plugging in headphones for monitoring, as this will allow you to hear the sound of your guitar running through the interface's digital EQ and reverb (the Polar Go offers five reverb voices). To get the best out of those features and edit them easily you'll want to install the Polar Go app, available for mobile devices, PC and Mac, which gives you independent control over signal coming in from the mics, the combi jack and even the TRRS jack if you're using a mic-equipped headset. The app also has a Camera control tab that lets you start, stop and save video recordings on your phone and monitor what the phone camera's 'seeing' as you play – with audio recorded via the Polar Go automatically sync'd to any video captured.

Verdict

Small, inexpensive, effective and easy to use, the Polar Go is a no-brainer pocket audio interface for guitarists who like the convenience and simplicity of phone videos but want pro-quality audio to match that does their playing and guitar tone proper justice – and more besides. Hard to fault. G



BLACKSTAR
POLAR GO

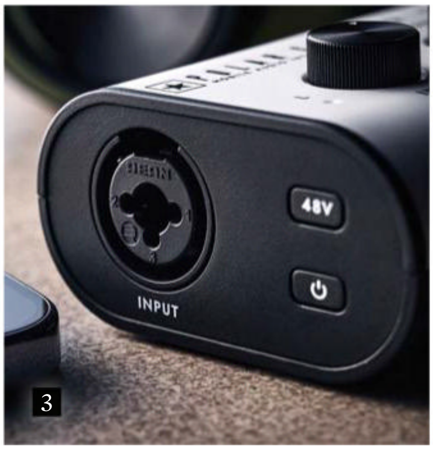
PRICE: £79
ORIGIN: UK/China
TYPE: Portable audio interface
FEATURES: Built-in pair of mics, Input/Output control knobs, 48V phantom power
CONTROLS: Input and Output control knobs, phantom power switch, internal battery power on/off switch
CONNECTIONS: USB-C power input, USB-C connection port, combi-jack input, TRRS jack
POWER: Internal battery (recharged via a dedicated USB-C port) or can draw power from mobile devices while connected
DIMENSIONS: 80 (w) x 65 (d) x 41mm (h)

Blackstar Amplification
+44 (0)1604 817817
https://blackstaramps.com

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Small, light, inexpensive; useful, easy to operate features; great sound quality from the in-built mics; useful inputs for external mics and sound sources; app works intuitively and well

CONS We'd love to edit settings via Bluetooth (rather than USB cable); plugged in, the cable can make phone positioning awkward



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THE RIVALS

If you want a small, quality mic that syncs to your phone's video recordings and acts as an interface for electric guitar as well, Focusrite used to make a product called the iTrack Pocket – an iPhone cradle with built-in mic and an accompanying app for controlling video capture on your phone. It's been discontinued, however, and replaced in the company's product line-up, in a broad sense, by the Vocaster One (£149, right), a slightly different kind of compact interface that's aimed more at podcasters but has an input for a single mic and can send audio to your video-capable camera via a TRS cable.

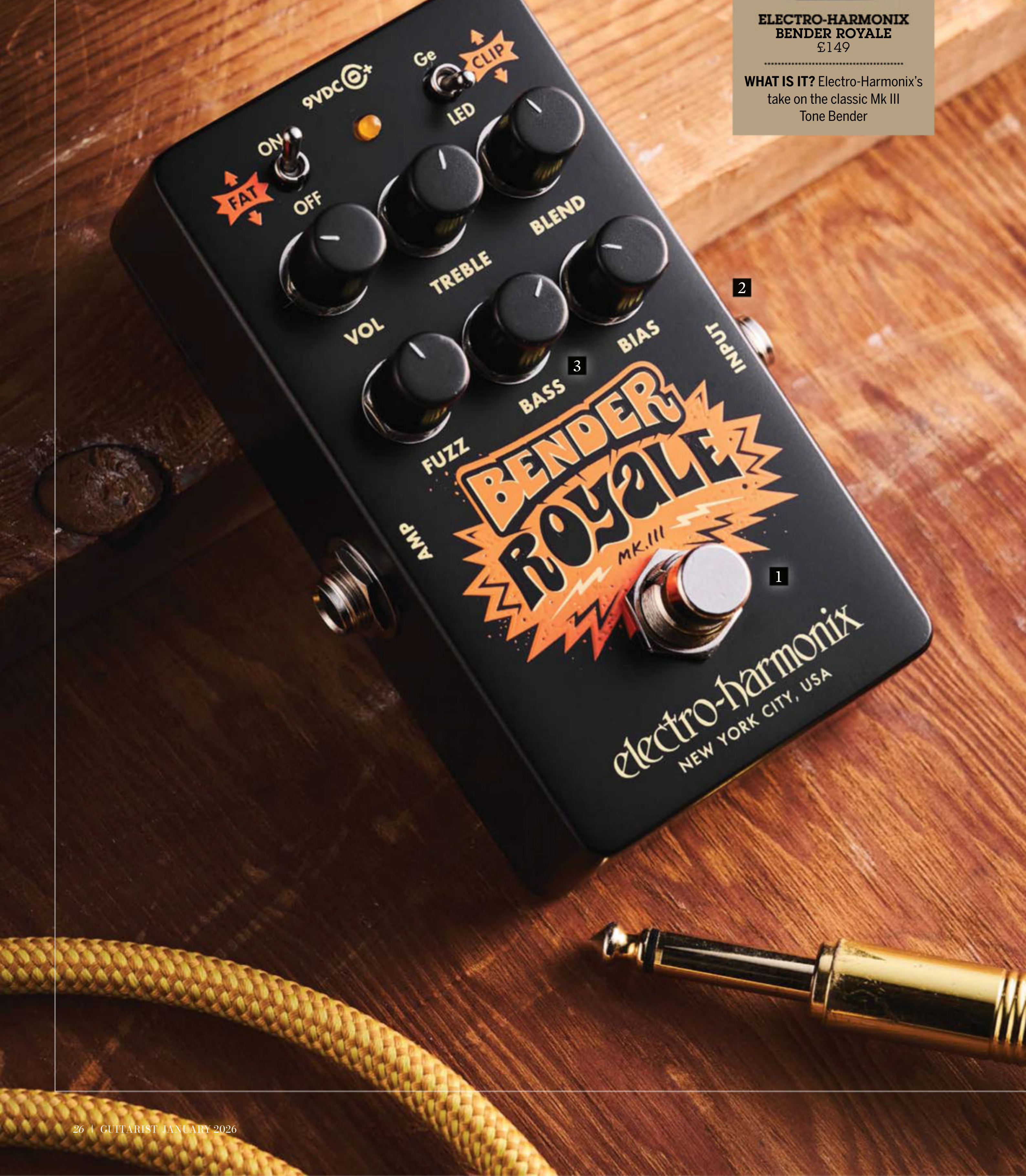
vocaster one

PHOTO COURTESY OF FOCUSRITE

ELECTRO-HARMONIX BENDER ROYALE

£149

WHAT IS IT? Electro-Harmonix's take on the classic Mk III Tone Bender


2
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BLEND
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VOL
BIAS
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FUZZ
INPUT
AMP
BENDER ROYALE
MK.III
electro-harmonix
NEW YORK CITY, USA

Fuzz King

Electro-Harmonix revives the classic three-transistor Tone Bender and evolves it for more sonic variety

Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Phil Barker

1. Besides standard on/off latching, this bypass footswitch has momentary action if you press-and-hold for more than half a second

2. You can plug a guitar straight in or put the pedal elsewhere in your signal path as an internal trimmer can adjust the impedance accordingly

3. The Bass knob here corresponds to an original Tone Bender's Treble/Bass control. Adjust it with the Treble knob set at noon to recreate vintage sounds

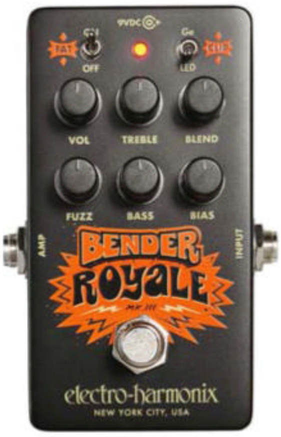
The Tone Bender, that classic British fuzz pedal born in the mid-60s, was produced in several variations and under several different brand names back in the day, a practice that still continues as pedal companies bring out new creations based on the vintage circuitry. The latest is Electro-Harmonix's Bender Royale, which is based on the three germanium transistor-equipped Mk III Tone Bender from the late 60s. The boffins at EHX have expanded its original three-knob feature set to create an evolved version with six knobs and a pair of toggle switches.

Standard Volume and Fuzz knobs are still present, but you get individual Treble and Bass knobs, rather than a single Tone control. There's also a Bias knob to adjust the input bias voltage of the fuzz circuit, and a Blend knob that gives you the full fuzz sound when set at its maximum but will blend in some dry sound as you roll it back. A Fat switch brings in more low-end and middle frequencies, plus you also get a switch offering two biasing diode options for the final germanium transistor fuzz stage.

Plugging in the pedal, its Tone Bender DNA is immediately apparent and it comes with two distinct but equally useful voices via the Fat switch, which transforms the leaner basic sound to something thicker and closer to the sound of our vintage Mk II Professional. The other toggle switch provides a more subtle change, with the LED option endowing a rougher edge to the sound than that of the smoother Ge setting. That's four combinations available right there, but you can then adjust the Bias knob, which has the most conventional Tone Bender voicing around noon and which can also dial in gated and sputtery (although not too extreme) drive-like crunch. Add those very effective Tone knobs and the blend options, and you have great-sounding fuzz with extended flexibility.

Verdict

The Bender Royale may well be based on a Tone Bender – and it can certainly deliver that familial sound – but, with that expanded feature set, this Electro-Harmonix offering can also be considered as a generic fuzz, and we mean that in a good way. The simple fact is that this amount of user-adjustable variation in a fuzz pedal is a real treat, facilitating a wide range of everyday fuzz needs from thick and smooth to raspy and raucous – plenty of versatility for your 'board in a single compact pedal. G



ELECTRO-HARMONIX BENDER ROYALE

PRICE: £149
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Fuzz pedal
FEATURES: True Bypass, adjustable series impedance into the fuzz circuit, latching and momentary footswitch action
CONTROLS: Volume, Fuzz, Treble, Bass, Bias, Blend, Fat On/Off, Clip (Ge/LED) switch, internal impedance trimmer, bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (supplied) 12mA
DIMENSIONS: 70 (w) x 111 (d) x 50mm (h)

Electro-Harmonix
www.ehx.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Compact size; momentary footswitch action; authentic Tone Bender sound; extended array of controls for full sonic flexibility

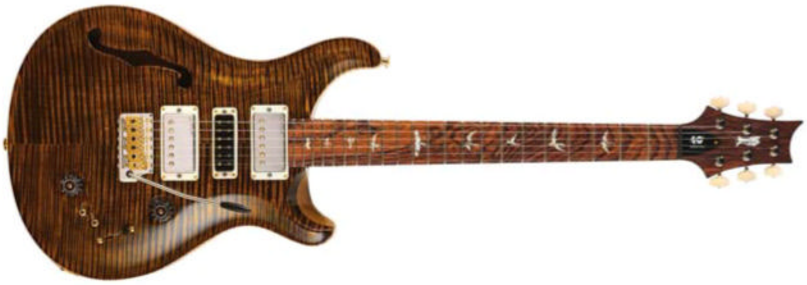
CONS Some will find those small knobs a bit fiddly; clean-up with guitar volume is not great

THE RIVALS

Fulltone's Soul-Bender V2 (£179) is based on a Mk III Tone Bender and features germanium transistors and an enhanced tone control response and range. The JHS Bender (£149) recreates a 1973 Mk III that is prized by the company's mainman, Josh Scott (while it's sold out on the official site, check UK retailers and the secondhand market). Meanwhile, Warm Audio's Warm Bender (£154, right) puts two Tone Bender circuits in one pedal, the Mk I and Mk II Professional, and Keeley Fuzz offers the Bender (£159), a five-knob, three-transistor fuzz with a combination of silicon and germanium.

WARM BENDER
WARM AUDIO

PHOTO: WARMAUDIO.COM



the Wishlist

Dream gear to beg, borrow and steal for...

PRS 40th Anniversary Special Semi-Hollow Limited Edition £6,499

CONTACT **PRS Guitars** PHONE **+44 (0)1223 874301** WEB **www.prsguitars.com** WORDS **Dave Burrluck** PHOTOGRAPHY **Phil Barker**

With new releases coming virtually every month, it's been a very busy celebratory year for PRS Guitars. Alongside additions to the standard Core, Bolt-On, S2 and SE ranges, we've seen six specific 40th Anniversary Limited Editions of which we understand this latest Special Semi-Hollow is the seventh and final piece. At the time of writing, it's the ninth Semi-Hollow PRS offers (five of which are three-pickup Specials), alongside five full Hollowbody models. Clearly, there's something in the air.

The Core-level Special Semi-Hollow is the base platform for this limited edition of just 280 pieces. The primary difference is the wood choice. The mahogany back and neck of that model are swapped for black limba, the darker streaked wood we also know as korina or white limba. Colour aside, it's the same tree species, and PRS has already featured it on the CE 24-08 Black Limba Limited Edition this year. There's no change in the top wood, but this figured maple is what PRS calls 'Artist grade', and the striping is quite fine and remarkably even, the contrast in the grain accentuated by the Yellow Tiger colour of the top (Whale Blue is the other option). The fingerboard and headstock facing remains rosewood, but here's it's Honduran, which is becoming quite a well-used back and sides wood for many higher-end acoustic makers. Visually, it's quite different from the darker, more evenly coloured Indian rosewood used on the standard Core model, with a lighter mid-brown colouration and a vivid darker figure – a stormy 'sky' for the 'old-school' outlined bird inlays.

The McCarty III humbuckers are a 40th-year introduction (a long time coming but worth the wait), and the switching system and dual 'coil tap' switches provide 12 sounds. But that's underplaying what we have here: the volume and tone controls colour the voices we hear, and even 'well-behaved Patent Applied For pickups' doesn't do the Alnico II 'buckers justice. As with the standard model, the misnamed 'coil tap' switches engage PRS's partial coil-splits, which primarily voice the slug coils of each humbucker with very little volume drop compared to the humbucking voice.

This model might be a relatively late addition in PRS's 40 years, but it's a supremely versatile platform that blurs the line between solidbody and semi.

1

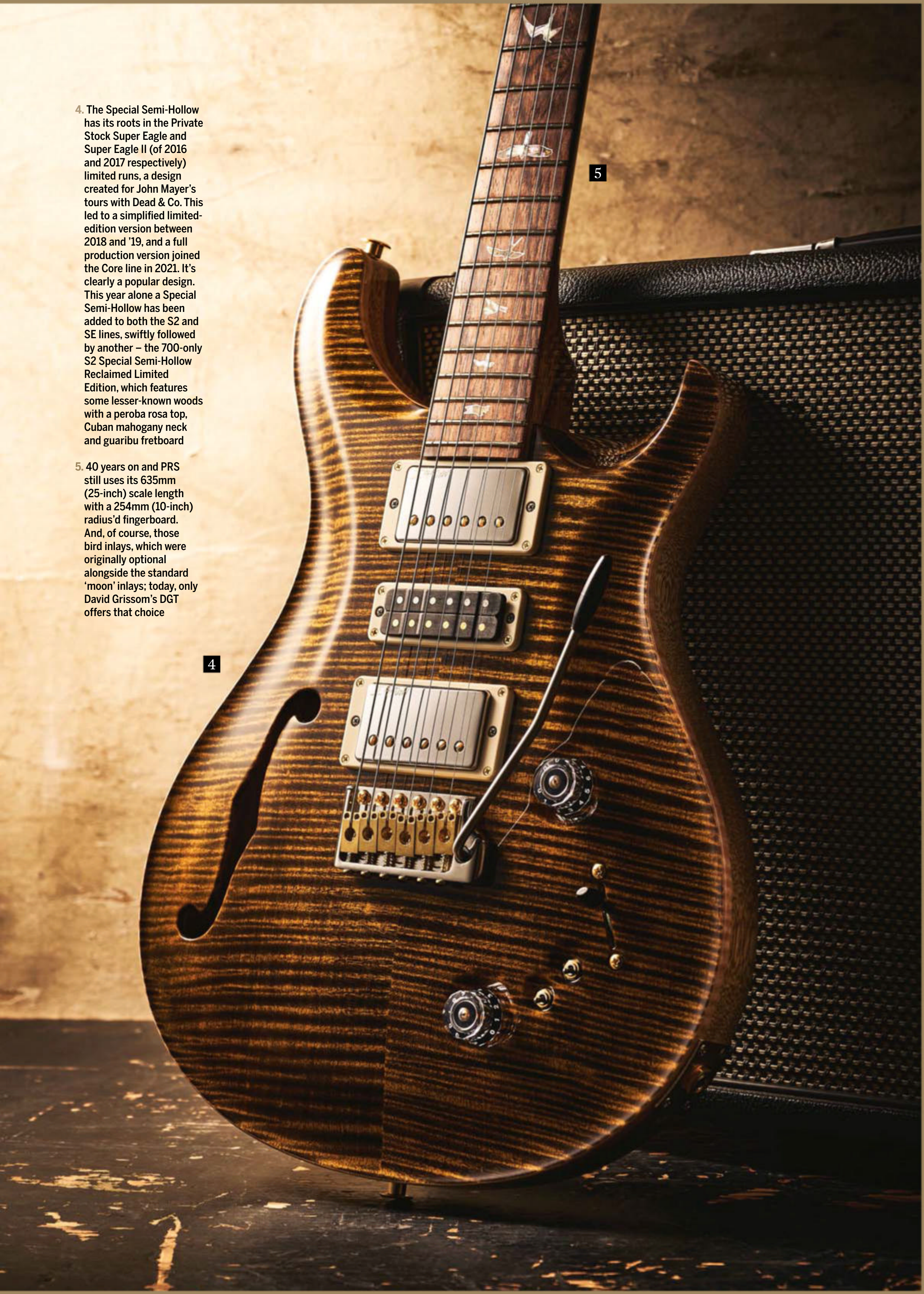
1. This 'pre-factory' eagle inlay is usually reserved for Private Stock guitars and was originally used on the custom builds by Paul Reed Smith before the production company kicked off in 1985

2

2. The black limba here is rare, particularly in these dual dark colours, though we did see a limited CE 24-08 with the same wood earlier in the year

3

3. The semi-hollow platform goes back to Limited Edition models from '89 (that had no f-hole) and is also used for the 40th Anniversary Custom 24-08 Semi-Hollow, CE 24 Semi-Hollow, S2 Vela Semi-Hollow and the SE Custom 24 Semi-Hollow Piezo



4. The Special Semi-Hollow has its roots in the Private Stock Super Eagle and Super Eagle II (of 2016 and 2017 respectively) limited runs, a design created for John Mayer's tours with Dead & Co. This led to a simplified limited-edition version between 2018 and '19, and a full production version joined the Core line in 2021. It's clearly a popular design. This year alone a Special Semi-Hollow has been added to both the S2 and SE lines, swiftly followed by another – the 700-only S2 Special Semi-Hollow Reclaimed Limited Edition, which features some lesser-known woods with a peroba rosa top, Cuban mahogany neck and guaribu fretboard

5. 40 years on and PRS still uses its 635mm (25-inch) scale length with a 254mm (10-inch) radius'd fingerboard. And, of course, those bird inlays, which were originally optional alongside the standard 'moon' inlays; today, only David Grissom's DGT offers that choice

Gas Supply

Our pick of the month's most delectable
and wallet-bothering new gear

Fender Johnny Marr Signature Special Jaguar £2,949

CONTACT **Fender GBI** PHONE **01342 331700** WEB **www.fender.com**

JARGON CRUNCHING

Wiring Options

Parallel wiring describes the 'standard' way our pickups connect to our output, with each pickup working in tandem with the others. In series wiring, however, the signal is pushed through each pickup, sort of like stacking up gain pedals. The result is increased power and volume, perfect if you want to cut through a busy mix.

What's this? All that chrome reminds me of Jaws from James Bond!

This is the all-new Fender Limited Edition Johnny Marr Signature Special Jaguar, the latest collaboration between Fender and the former Smiths/Cribs/Modest Mouse (to name but a few) guitarist. And it's funny that you should mention Bond because Marr has also lent his licks to a *Bond* theme, too!

Doesn't he already have a signature Jag?

He does indeed. As Marr fans will likely know, Johnny's love of the Jaguar began when he joined Modest Mouse. He connected with Fender's short-scale offset via the band's frontman, Isaac Brock. "It sounded like I think I'm supposed to sound, how people think I sound," Marr tells Fender.

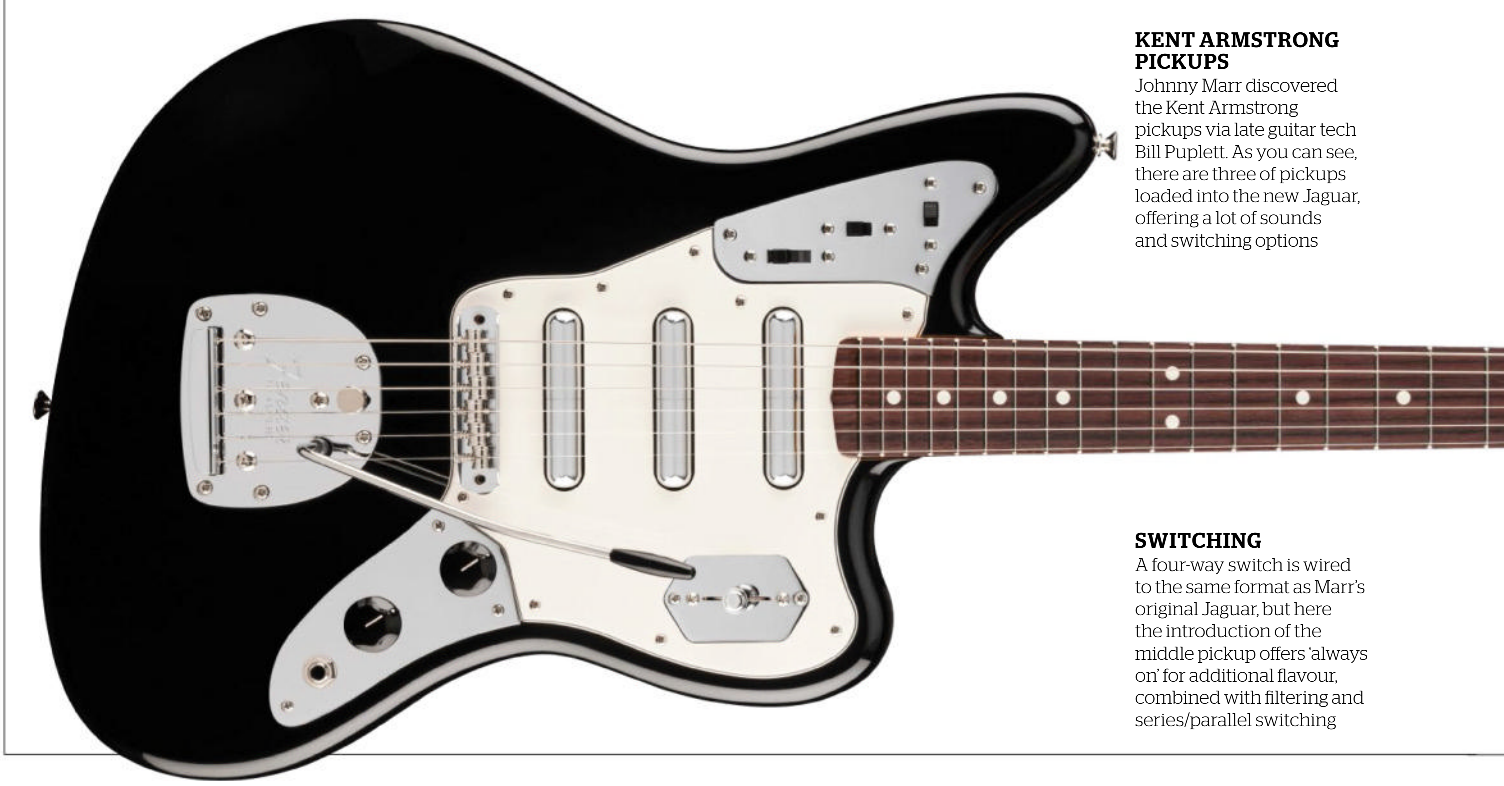
From here, Johnny eventually released his first signature Fender Jaguar in 2012, aiming to perfect the guitar's design in terms of versatility. But this one is a bit different. To start with, it's got a trio of Kent Armstrong lipstick pickups…

Okay, we're listening…

They're signature units, too. The pickups were wound to Johnny's tastes and based on Kent Armstrong's design at the suggestion of Marr's long-time guitar repairer, Bill Puplett, who passed away in 2024. As with Johnny's original Jaguar, these are wired to a four-way Tele-style paddle switch, offering Marr's 'signature' configuration, as found in the original Johnny Marr Jaguar.

Right, but there's a lot more switches.

We're getting to it! In the 'original' switching configuration, it goes like this: bridge pickup (position 1); bridge and neck, parallel (position 2); neck (position 3); neck and bridge, series (position 4). The addition of the third pickup offers extra tonality. This is controlled by the third slider switch on the upper horn. With three positions of its own, it allows you to add the middle pickup into every position on the blade switch, with the other two positions either switching the middle pickup off entirely, or disengaging the other pickups and blade switch for 'middle pickup only', regardless of the selector's position.



KENT ARMSTRONG PICKUPS

Johnny Marr discovered the Kent Armstrong pickups via late guitar tech Bill Puplett. As you can see, there are three of pickups loaded into the new Jaguar, offering a lot of sounds and switching options

SWITCHING

A four-way switch is wired to the same format as Marr's original Jaguar, but here the introduction of the middle pickup offers 'always on' for additional flavour, combined with filtering and series/parallel switching

Six-in-line American Vintage tuners grace the Jaguar headstock

I think I need to lie down.
Wait! We're not finished yet. There are still another two switches to talk about. First is a Universal Bright Switch, which applies a high-pass filter to the sound. If you want to keep everything standard but still roll off the potential boom of the bridge/neck series wiring, then there's a second Bright switch that only works in position 4.

Anything else?
Yes, it's got the usual Jaguar appointments including the vibrato and vintage-style tuners. The fingerboard radius is flatter at a more middle-ground 241mm (9.5 inches) compared with the vintage 184mm (7.25-inch) radius of the original. Plus Johnny has spec'd the guitar with a Jag bridge but tweaked it with Mustang saddles for greater stability.

Right on, so what's the damage?
Fender hasn't said exactly how many of these will be made, but given the take-up of the original we think they're going to be popular. It comes in gloss black nitrocellulose finish with a hardcase and costs £2,949. **[SW]**

FINGERBOARD RADIUS
While Johnny's original signature model adopted the 184mm (7.25-inch) radius we associate with vintage Fenders, this time he's opted for a flatter 241mm (9.5-inch) curve. In theory, it's less divisive and should appeal to a wider range of players – and hands

LIMITED EDITION
Fender is yet to be drawn on a number when it comes to how many of these are being produced, and at nearly £3k it's hardly an impulse buy. But miss out and heaven knows you'll be miserable...

ALSO OUT NOW...

IK MULTIMEDIA TONEX PLUG €149

IK Multimedia's Tonex amp-capturing technology has been a big hit since it first launched, and if you thought it was impossible to make it any more portable than the tiny Tonex One pedal, then think again. The Tonex Plug follows the similar headphone-amp format we've seen from the likes of Vox, Fender, Blackstar and more, but comes packing IK's Tonex technology. Loaded with 30 onboard presets and access to tens of thousands more via the ToneNet resource, you can load your favourite Tone Models or capture your own and take them anywhere. Meanwhile, the free Tonex Control app allows for deeper editing via your phone. The Tonex Plug features a hinged jack plug, so it'll fit any guitar socket/placement, there's a rechargeable battery (for up to six hours playing time), Bluetooth for jamming to your music library and a USB audio interface.
www.ikmultimedia.com

EPIPHONE STUDIO ACOUSTICS FROM £349

As we watch gear prices continue to soar, 'affordable' is now a lot more than a few years ago. So it's only right, then, that we acknowledge real-world gear when it comes along. Here, Epiphone has released four attainable versions of classic Gibson acoustics (left to right): the Blues King (£349), Dove (£449), Hummingbird (£449), J-45 (£449), and J-200 (£499). Each one features a solid spruce top, paired with laminated back and sides (maple for the J-200 and Dove, mahogany for the others). They're also loaded with Fishman electronics in the form of the S-Core under-saddle pickup and Presys II preamp with two-band EQ. All models come in a choice of two finishes, with cutaway versions available for the J-200, J-45 and Hummingbird, and left-handed models available throughout.
www.epiphone.com

THE LINEUP

Fretbuzz

A monthly look at must-hear artists from all corners of the guitar world, from the roots of their sound to the tracks that matter most

Artist: George Hume

Album: Georgie Hume & The Pity Party (ZeroFret)

The debut album from Goerge Hume and co moves between 50s easy-listening styles to a darker "surf exotica" sound
www.georgiehumepityparty.com

With their electrifying mix of Afro-Cuban rhythms and moody surf tones, London-based trio Georgie Hume & The Pity Party are making a name for themselves as purveyors of a more unusual, tropical kind of jazz. Led by guitarist George Hume, their new self-titled album is the kind of recording that draws influence from far and wide, with some truly breathtaking results.

Mellow Mood

What's perhaps most interesting about this debut album is how it all feels led by the songs themselves; it's less about noodling and more about telling a story through repetition and atmosphere. "I guess I wanted this music to feel quite song-driven, rather than starting with a head, me soloing for however long and then going back to the head," says George. "I have hundreds of those kinds of records and love them, but our songs will have A and B sections, and then a middle eight."

Cheers To The Landlord

The band was born in an East London pub. With no beer garden or sports on TV, the landlord decided to showcase music to attract more customers. "We were all working musicians in London," says George. "We'd play every Saturday from four until six, which was nice because everyone could go off afterwards. There wasn't much rehearsal, as most of it was done live. I'd have an idea and we'd just have to see how it worked. That's the beauty of instrumental music: people can engage if they want to, while others might just want a beer at the back."

George's influences range far and wide, from the music of West Africa to the guitar playing of Marc Ribot, Manuel Galbán and Jim Campilongo

PHOTO BY NICK TYDEMAN

One Note Samba

"My biggest influence is Jim Campilongo, who has been called the 'Picasso of the Telecaster'," says George. "He taught me a lot about guitar culture through his *Vinyl Treasures* column, which showcases obscure records. I ended up collecting things like *Mambo Sinuendo* by Ry Cooder and Manuel Galbán from the Buena Vista Social Club or *The Fabulous Roy Lanham* where he's holding his Jazzmaster, wearing this amazing moustache on the cover. Another big one for me is Marc Ribot, who has worked with Tom Waits. He has that angular diminished sound unlike anyone else, mixed with influences from Haiti and Cuba. Our song *Little Eddie* took inspiration from that."

Swing To Bop

For the recordings, George stuck with vintage gear made in the 50s and 60s. His main guitar is a 1956 Gibson ES-225 – a double-pickup hollowbody that essentially served as a precursor to the ES-330. "It was my only opportunity to get into that world at an acceptable price," he says. "The P-90s from that period are wild. It's like trying to tame a beast, but the 225 fills space better than a Tele. I like hearing the struggle with a guitar. There's a charm and personality there. My main amp is a 1960 DeArmond RT5, which is an incredible little amp, but I also own a 1964 black-panel Deluxe Reverb and a 1966 black-panel Princeton Reverb. It's all vintage originals with me, maybe because my dad was an antiques dealer and I took that mindset to guitars."

Humble Bossa Nova

The group's latest single, *Parquet Parakeet*, was the final track to be written for the album and is indicative of where they'll be heading in the future. "Some tracks are heavily indebted to the 50s easy-listening guitar records," George says. "It's a more gentle sound or, as I like to call it, a humble bossa nova. I can feel the band moving towards something slightly darker, which I call 'surf exotica', similar to the diminished-style direction of *Parquet Parakeet*; it's more adventurous. I want to incorporate more West African influences, this whole other territory of guitar. It's all doublestops, not a million miles away from soul, but the rhythms are different." **[AS]**

Standout track: *Big Wave*
For fans of: Buena Vista Social Club, Wes Montgomery

"It's all vintage originals with me… my dad was an antiques dealer and I took that mindset to guitars"

MY SECRET WEAPON

George Hume on the pedal that he could not live without

A lot of guitarists would say their favourite pedal is some kind of overdrive or delay. That, however, is not the case with George Hume. "My Demeter TRM-1 Tremulator is my secret weapon," he says. "Ry Cooder himself helped with the design. It has this boost that I simply can't get out of any other pedal. Even if the tremolo is doing nothing, the circuit does something to the sound and creates this sweet spot."

PHOTO BY NICK TYDEMAN

Albums

The month's best guitar music – a hand-picked selection of the finest fretwork on wax

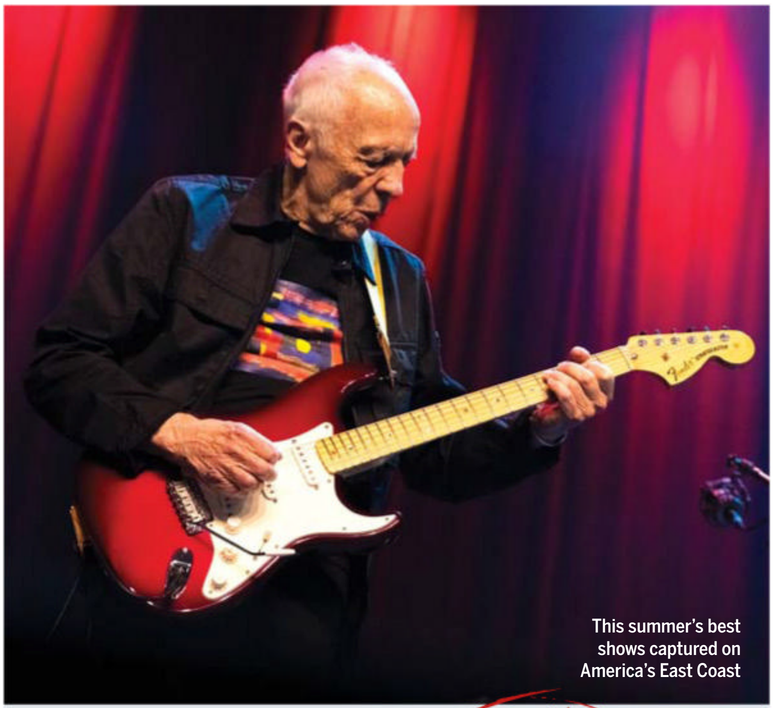


PHOTO BY JIM ARBOGAST

This summer's best shows captured on America's East Coast

Robin Trower

Guitarist CHOICE

One Moment In Time: Live In The USA

Artone/Provogue (Available 30 Jan)

Live album crowns a phenomenal 60-year-plus career

We've regularly spoken to artists who have just been on a long tour and they generally say the same thing: many nights on the tour are good, but one or two are just exceptional. And that is the story here. In the summer of 2025, Robin embarked on a 25-date US tour, just after the release of his latest studio album, *Come And Find Me*, and found that the dates at the Music Box At The Borgata, Atlantic City, New Jersey on 14 June and the Tupelo Music Hall in Derry, New Hampshire on 24 June had a certain mojo. Luckily, his sound engineer, James Kane, was recording both dates and it is these two gigs that you hear on *One Moment In Time*.

Those who have been following Robin's career since the 60s will be familiar with every track here with a near-perfect balance between newer material and classics from his gilt-edged time at the business end of his Strat. "Those songs have to be in there because they're the audience's favourites," Robin tells us, speaking of classics like *Too Rolling Stoned*, *Day Of The Eagle*, *Little Bit Of Sympathy* and the immortal *Bridge Of Sighs*. That familiar Strat tone, basted with Uni-Vibe and fuzz, is all still there, as are the chops. It all adds up to 77 minutes in excellent company! **[DM]**

Standout track: *Wither On The Vine*
For fans of: Jimi Hendrix, SRV, Walter Trout

Julian Lage

Scenes From Above

Blue Note (available 23 January)

Brilliant jazzer forms new quartet for sharp-edged outing

Julian Lage started his musical life as a prodigy. By the age of only 12 he was navigating to new territory on his fretboard and since then has matured into a simply amazing talent. His previous Blue Note album, the Grammy-nominated *Speak To Me*, was produced by Joe Henry. Here, teamed once again with Henry in the producer's chair, Julian is joined by a brand-new band featuring keyboardist John Medeski, bassist Jorge Roeder and drummer Kenny Wollesen. Together, the quartet explores many different musical landscapes, from the funkiness of *Talking Drum* to the wistful, lilting groove of album opener (and first single from the album), *Opal*. Lage's guitar – both acoustic and electric – manoeuvres itself through twists and turns, always landing in unexpected places. A joyous journey through the mind of a true master. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Night Shade*
For fans of: Pat Metheny, Jim Hall

Eric Bibb

Guitarist CHOICE

One Mississippi

Repute Records (available 30 January)

ERIC BIBB
ONE MISSISSIPPI

Groove-laden acoustic blues hits the spot

"This new collection of stories, from a not-too-distant American past and a tense global present, is a call for peace, justice and unity in a divided world," Eric says of his brand-new album. But the serious messages contained within the 14 tracks on *One Mississippi* come wrapped in some fabulously funky grooves. As with Eric's last album, *In The Real World*, he is accompanied by a very select team of players, including Robbie McIntosh, who provides some majestic electric guitar throughout. Opening with the title track, written by songwriting legend Janis Ian, the mood is set perfectly for the rest of the album. Each track tells a story, notably *Crossroads Marilyn Monroe* and *No Clothes On*, with Eric's honey-toned vocal keeping the listener engaged throughout. Watch out for UK dates in 2026, with two dates in London in January and a full tour beginning in March. **[LD]**

Standout track: *Go Down Ol' Hanna*
For fans of: Taj Mahal, Keb' Mo'

After a 16-year recording absence, the Steve Morse Band is back

PHOTO BY NICK NERSESOV

Steve Morse Band

Triangulation

Music Theories Recordings (available now)

Guest stars enhance new Morse Band outing

When the single *Break Through* was released in September, it was the first new music from The Steve Morse Band since 2009. But at last the drought is over and Steve has returned to solo manoeuvring, with band members Dave LaRue on bass and Van Romaine on drums by his side. But the personnel on the album doesn't end there, as *Triangulation* finds Steve teaming up with fellow artists Eric Johnson and John Petrucci, as well as Steve's son and guitar-star-in-the-making, Kevin Morse. As you'd expect, the album is riff-laden and chock-full of stunning playing throughout. On *TexUs*, Eric Johnson and Steve harmonise on the main melody before breaking away for breathtaking individual solo sections. Petrucci comes aboard for the title track, a snarling, riffmatic workout with 32nd notes aplenty. Stunning! **[LD]**

Standout track: *Triangulation*
For fans of: The Dixie Dregs, Andy Timmons

Steve Hogarth

SPQR: Live From Sala Sinopoli, Roma

earMUSIC (available 16 January)

Marillion vocalist recorded in intimate live setting

"I don't know what I'm going to do…" Steve Hogarth announces at the beginning of this mammoth live outing. Of course, we're used to lead singers having solo careers and Marillion's 'H', as Mr Hogarth is known, is no exception. The album was recorded back in February of 2024 at Rome's Sala Sinopoli in front of a crowd of delighted Romans, most of whom, we suspect, were fans of his day-job band. And they wouldn't have gone home disappointed as Marillion classics such as *Afraid Of Sunlight*, *Estonia* and *Easter* are included here, alongside tracks like Leonard Cohen's *Famous Blue Raincoat* and a surprise appearance from The Beatles' *All You Need Is Love*. Delivered with intimacy and passion, and accompanied by Roman band RanestRane, the album offers a snapshot of the sheer power that finely crafted songs can sometimes deliver when stripped back to their bare bones. Simply magical. **[DM]**

Standout track: *Estonia*
For fans of: Marillion, Big Big Train

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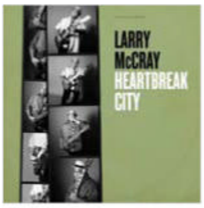
Tones Behind The Tracks

Produced by Joe Bonamassa and Josh Smith, **Larry McCray**'s new album combines a rich tapestry of influences with an uplifting spirit

Artist: Larry McCray

Album: Heartbreak City (KTBA Records)



Larry's latest solo album, *Heartbreak City*, features all original songs, plus guest playing by producers Joe Bonamassa and Josh Smith

Now in his mid-60s, Larry McCray's career has taken him all the way from new kid on the block to elder statesman of the blues. With mentors such as Albert King, Buddy Guy and Albert Collins, McCray was schooled in the art of pentatonic conversation like few others and learned how to make his guitar speak as profoundly as any human voice. This year the Michigan-based musician is back with new album, *Heartbreak City*, which was produced by Joe Bonamassa and Josh Smith and features a host of special guests including the producers themselves, along with Kirk Fletcher and Double Trouble keyboardist Reese Wynans.

This is a very uplifting record that crosses over into lots of areas of the blues.

"That's the intention. Whenever I'm asked what kind of music I play, I usually say I play 'feel-good music'. I like to sing songs that are soothing in any kind of situation. I always felt that blues was broader than how it was depicted. Whenever I meet people who don't have the same appreciation for it, I realise they haven't discovered the right presentation of it."

Larry has put down his long-standing Gibson in favour of this Guild Polara S-100, which features on the new album and its cover

PHOTO BY CURTIS KNAPP

The opening track, *Try To Be A Good Man*, kicks everything with some Albert King-inspired lines that really wail.

"He was one of my biggest mentors. I loved Albert King. He would notice if you were trying to be good. You always had to show a bit of respect to Albert because that's just what he was like. He'd come around saying stuff like, 'Hey boy, what you playing? Quit doing all that skipping and gimme something from the gut!' like an antagonistic coach [laughs]. I'm lucky I got to meet people like him, BB and Koko Taylor. They made me fall in love with music in the first place. I used to be the youngest of all these players and now I'm the fuckin' oldest!"

The title track is a G minor blues that runs seven-and-a-half minutes long. What's the secret to holding people's attention like that?

"It's because I've listened to a lot over the years and incorporate other elements into my sound. Being a teenager in the 70s, I was a big funk fan, listening to Larry Graham and Louis Johnson. Then I left Arkansas and moved to Michigan and got exposed to heavy metal. I ended up becoming a big Def Leppard and Judas Priest fan. My criticism of blues at the time was that everybody was going for the post-war or Delta acoustic sound. Nobody was trying to take things to the next level, which is something I've always strived for."

You're holding a Guild electric on the cover. Is that what we're hearing?

"That's the one. It's a Polara S-100 reissue with push-pull switches to split the coils. It's a great-playing guitar, man. I wrote them a letter this morning trying to see if they would endorse me. Because I love guitars like the Bluesbird, which is a bit like a Les Paul, and the X-175, which is reminiscent of the ES-175. The tones you hear are incredible. I think Guild guitars sound in between a Fender and a Gibson. They are brighter than Gibsons, but still have the low-end punch of a humbucker. I've played Gibson my whole career – now I want something different."

And what were you plugging into?

"I played through Joe's rig. He has a nice collection of Dumble amplifiers. It was a little combo that was about the size of a Princeton, with a really warm tone. I plugged into Joe's MXR FET Driver and a Klon clone.

PHOTO BY MARK HORTON/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES

I have a real Klon, but I don't take it anywhere because it's worth so much. Effects are great, but the more you have, the more things can go wrong."

It's amazing how lyrical your solos can be, almost most like a voice at times.

"I use vocals for inspiration. I'm a baritone singer; I can only go so high, so I use my guitar to visit places I can't with my voice. It's like I'm singing through the guitar. I forced myself to learn all five pentatonic positions. Most people only tend to play in the 1st and 2nd [positions]. The best key to learn in is A minor: you can start with a G note on the 3rd fret and then climb into the 1st position, moving up the neck horizontally. You can mix minor with major for a blend. You can transfer this knowledge to any key and find melodies naturally. We all know how the pentatonic scale sounds. It's such a big part of the guitar, so it's important to know how to play it across the neck."

> "I use vocals for inspiration. I can only go so high, so I use my guitar to visit places I can't with my voice. It's like I'm singing through the guitar"

Beyond that, what's the secret to a good blues solo?

"When I start playing, it's usually with a slow bluesy lick. The second time I come around, I might throw in something a little jazzy. The third time, I might be all-out rocking and then the final pass is bringing it all back home. It's good to change it up. Try not to think in the same vein, whether it's how you attack the notes, what notes you play or the rhythm. You have to tell your truth. As long as you're speaking your truth and playing from the heart, people will listen."

The art of playing the blues, McCray-style: "As long as you're speaking your truth and playing from the heart, people will listen"

This is your second time working with Joe. What have you learned from him?

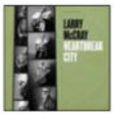
"I learned I'll never be able to play like him and it's best to stick to what I know. Joe is a one-in-a-million kind of player. He's a special talent, and the same goes for Josh Smith, who wrote *Bright Side* and the title track. Even though I can't play like Joe, I still use him for inspiration. I have good dexterity for moments that call for me to play fast and step outside of the box. It was fun jamming together on the track *I Know What I've Done*. It reminds you to stay humble and be as good as you can be. Music isn't a competition against other players. It's a competition against yourself."

It really is an all-star cast on this album, especially with Reese Wynans involved.

"I loved talking to Reese about his time with Stevie [Ray Vaughan], who I never got to hang with. The night he died, I was at Buddy Guy's Legends club [in Chicago] waiting for Buddy, Stevie and Clapton because there was a rumour they were about to come and jam. All these musicians were waiting to see them. Then we were told they'd all gone down. You'll never see a house full of people get so quiet, it was pin-drop silence, and eventually we found out Buddy and Eric were okay. It was a terrible thing. I'll never forget that day."

You've seen this kind of music rise and fall numerous times over the years. Where does the blues stand in 2025?

"There are some great people trying to keep the blues alive. My biggest criticism is that the format seems to have changed. When we were coming up, there was always a structure; you'd know where the changes are. Nowadays, young people just change when they want to. I know I'm getting older because I sound like my dad! I'm just happy there are people interested enough to preserve it. I love Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram. I have a 25-year-old son who's a better singer and guitarist than me, so I have high hopes for him. And there's another great young man in Arkansas called Josh Parks. He's one to watch." **[AS]**



Larry McCray's new album, *Heartbreak City*, is available now via KTBA Records

www.larrymccrayofficial.com

NEVILLE'S
ADVOCATE

Gone Shopping...

Neville Martin attempts to seek out a quality acoustic 12-string, but ends up salivating over a sunburst single-cut instead

I have an imminent acoustic gig that involves playing Kim Wilde's big hit *Kids In America* with her dad, Marty, at his annual Society Of Distinguished Songwriters (SODS) dinner. American readers might not know Kim or her dad. Marty had 17 UK Top 20 hits in the late 50s and early 60s, while 80s superstar Kim remains hugely successful here and across Europe. She topped the Billboard Hot 100 with her cover of The Supremes' *You Keep Me Hangin' On*, too. Marty co-wrote *Kids...* with his son Ricky.

> "I proffered the quip: 'You know, I've completely gone off 'Bursts.' Just then I spied my perfect Les Paul: a Murphy Lab, heavily aged '59 Standard"

The aforementioned 'do' is at a posh London hotel, where a who's who of British songwriting legends will be in attendance. The idea is that each member gets up and delivers one of their top compositions. As an example of the calibre of writers there, last year Van Morrision regaled us with *Brown Eyed Girl* on his Martin dreadnought. And he was, by some margin, not the most successful songsmith there.

Anyway, now living within striking distance of "Europe's premier guitar store", I nipped in to try a few acoustic 12s. I've been thinking of adding one to my clutch and this event could be the perfect catalyst. Alan, the store' s co-proprietor, sorted me out three acoustic 12s: a Martin D-28 Standard, a Gibson J-45 Standard and a Taylor 354ce. He also hooked me up to a lovely Taylor Circa 74 acoustic amp in mahogany. Sadly, the shop had sold its mighty Guild F-512 the day before, the one I would most likely have gravitated towards.

In the hour or so I played the guitars, my impression was that the Taylor played the nicest, the Gibson sounded best through the amp, and the Martin didn't particularly speak to this huge fan of the brand. Plus, it had no pickup fitted, so I couldn't plug in. In this day and age, how can they not even fit even a basic system? If one buys a quality acoustic mainly for home noodling, it's still nice to know that the occasional plugged-in gig is doable. And I've ranted about this before, but all three guitars had 12 heavy cast-metal tuners, instead of two six-a-side strips or, as Guild does, a dozen open-back pegs. The absent Guild also sports the top-line LR Baggs Anthem pickup and is by far the most commanding-looking instrument.

But as it happens, I didn't actually leave the store with a 12-string. However...

Les Is More

...Alan did proudly grant me a guided tour of his massive emporium. The store and its almost endless variety of guitars and amps is jaw-dropping. But on seeing the array of Custom Shop Les Pauls on display I proffered the quip: "You know, I've completely gone off 'Bursts."

Just then I spied my perfect Les Paul: a Murphy Lab, heavily aged '59 Standard in a stunning 'faded but not completely gone' sunburst, with my favourite 'flickering' maple grain. The ageing was beautifully done: the lacquer checking, the perfectly aged hardware, and not too much grainching on the back. The mahogany was gorgeously grained, too. I was hooked! It was, of course, a ton of money. So the 12-string I'd intended to leave with took a back seat while my mind got to thinking what I could trade in to acquire this siren of a six-string.

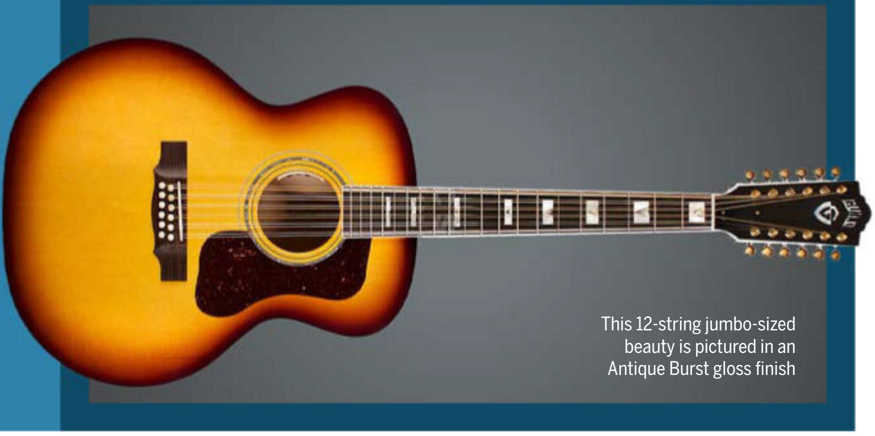
How fickle we guitarists are! I'll probably nip back in the next few days and will keep you updated should the situation progress. In the meantime, have you readers got any 'turn on a dime' instrumental changes of heart you'd like to share?

NEV'S GAS OF THE MONTH

Dirty Dozen

What? Guild F-512E Maple ATB
Where seen? www.musicstore.com (formerly DV247)
Price? €3,696

I've featured the cheaper Guild 12-string in this corner, so here's the full-fat version. The F512 E is a J-200 sized monster with curly maple body, AAA Sitka spruce top, mahogany neck with walnut centre strip, and bound ebony fingerboard and headstock sporting pearl and abalone inlays. The sunburst finish is stunning, and 12 open-back gold Gotoh tuners should minimise neck heaviness. With LR Baggs' superb Anthem pickup onboard, it's a world-class instrument as fit for the biggest stages as for a good old strum down the local boozer!



This 12-string jumbo-sized beauty is pictured in an Antique Burst gloss finish

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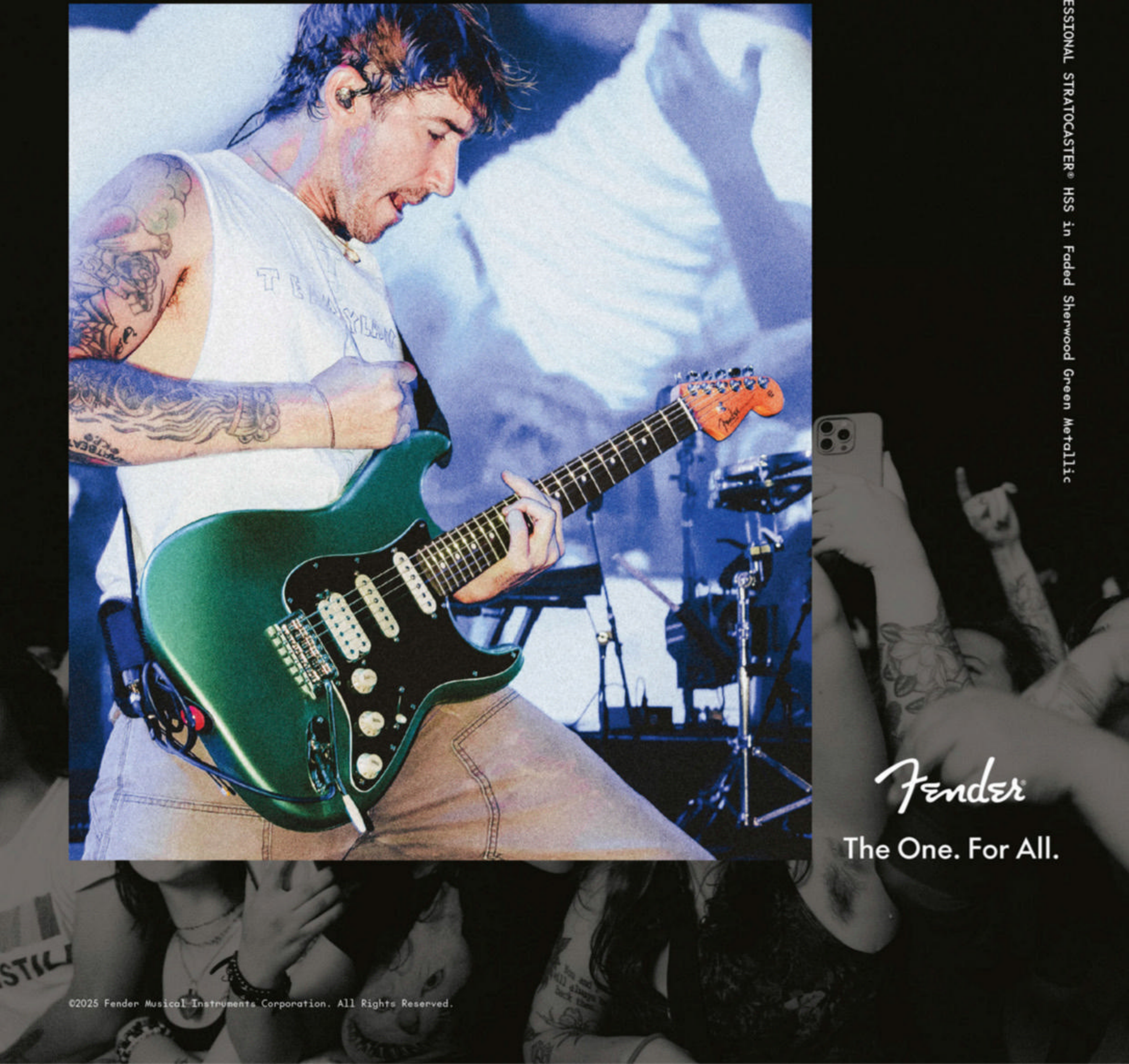

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Making History

Alex Bishop takes a trip to Oxford to indulge in the beauty and craftmanship of guitars from centuries past

What does a luthier do in his time off? Well, in my case, one Sunday morning in October I clad myself in Lycra and cycled 140km across the south of England to visit one of the UK's finest musical instrument collections, which is located at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

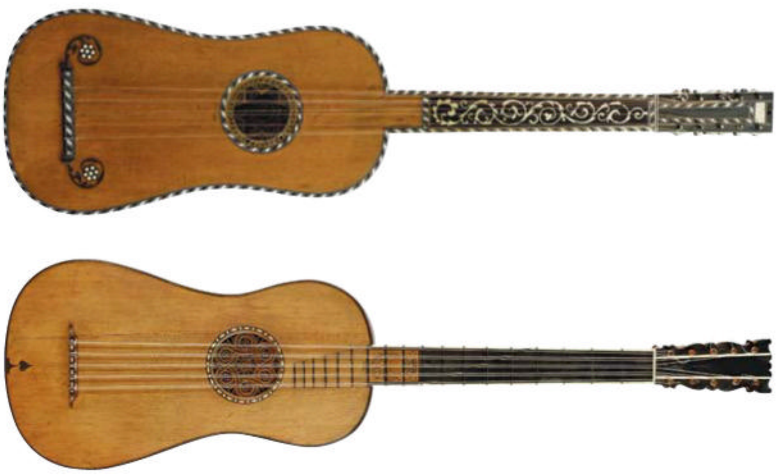
Five hours and a very big full English breakfast later, I found myself standing (no longer in Lycra, thankfully) before a glass cabinet containing 'The Messiah', a violin crafted by pre-eminent luthier Antonio Stradivari. Having been kept for most of its life under lock and key in a collection, the violin was often anticipated but – like its namesake – never appeared.

> "The fact that all this was accomplished by hand and candlelight three centuries ago is completely mind-boggling"

For an instrument more than 300 years old, it's in astonishingly good condition, which makes it the most famous violin in the world. However, I was not here to ogle a mere violin. Instead, I was rather more interested in its fretted counterparts in the adjacent cabinet – a quartet of 17th-century guitars.

Striking Showpieces

Even to a casual observer, a single glance at these instruments is breathtaking. Adorned with highly intricate mother-of-pearl inlays, engraved ivory and eye-watering amounts of marquetry, all framed by decorative purfling, they boast some of the finest craftsmanship ever to be witnessed on a musical instrument. The fact that all this was accomplished by hand and candlelight three centuries ago is completely mind-boggling.



Below: René Voboam's 1641 guitar (top) and a less-adorned but no less spectacular instrument designed by Antonio Stradivari (bottom) from 1688

PHOTOS © ASHMOLEAN, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

The most visually striking of the group was built by Frenchman René Voboam (see image right, top), with lashings of tortoiseshell veneers creating dramatic chevron patterns along the sides and back. With the appreciation that there were limitations to workshop facilities in those days (electricity wouldn't be harnessed for another 200 years), I was struck by the thought that the scale of industry during this making revolution must have been incredible. No doubt there were suppliers whose sole job it was to obtain, prepare and supply tortoiseshell veneer to furniture makers and musical instruments workshops all over Paris.

A technical look at these Baroque guitars brought to light other differences between them and their modern counterparts. Gut-strung with five courses of two strings each, these 10-string showpieces appear – despite their narrow bodies – a little longer with scale lengths of around 660mm (26 inches), compared with our more familiar 645mm (25.4 inches). They were most commonly tuned to an oddly familiar ADGBE tuning (the 'low E' being a later addition), albeit with certain notes sounding an octave higher than one might expect (familiar to five-string banjo and ukulele players and known as 're-entrant' tuning).

Stretched out gracefully next to the Voboam was a plainer but no less elegant guitar, dressed in flamed-maple back and sides and glowing under an amber varnish that was a nod towards the violins in the room. Built in Cremona in the 1680s, this was the Stradivari guitar, one of only five in the world. Despite its understated appearance, there was no denying the skilled craftsmanship on display; the delicate three-ply soundhole design alone was clearly designed to impress a small parlour-room audience, rather than help project the sound across a concert hall.

There were some similarities to the lute with the necks featuring tie-on frets. With the ability to slightly reposition frets, the players could access different temperaments with relative ease, allowing the player to perform in perfect consonance across all keys. This is impossible with the fixed fret positions on a modern fretted guitar – and would have no doubt made a 'refret' repair much easier (and cheaper!).

But where, after more than three centuries of musical development and technological progress, does this leave the luthier today? Reflecting on my recent attempts to reimagine possibilities in guitar design, I am reminded of an email I received from guitar-making superstar and doyen of the lutherie world, Michihiro Matsuda: "If you want to explore new ideas, look to the past. Everything has already been done." And perhaps that's the luthier's eternal challenge – to rediscover old ideas in new ways, and let the past shape the future. G

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On Record

Recording acoustic guitars at home can be frustrating and rewarding in equal measure – **Michael Watts** shares some hard-won advice

Anyone who has pointed a condenser mic at an acoustic guitar in the hope of hearing an accurately captured and musically inspiring recording upon playback may have instead felt disappointment at the opposite. I know I have. The acoustic guitar – whether flat-top or archtop, steel- or nylon-strung, flat-wound or rubber-bridged – can be a bit of a pain to capture, especially for the self-recording player. The reality is the vast majority of acoustic recordings are tracked, at best, in a modest home studio, or, at worst, a completely untreated bedroom (or toilet…).

Quality of sound at source is a vital part of the process. I had an in-depth chat with Nashville studio ace Rory Rositas (Tommy Emmanuel, Bryan Sutton) who has this to offer on the subject.

"I've always said a good song transcends a bad recording, but for any recording the source is the most important part. If the source doesn't sound the way you want it, then the recording will also not sound the way you want it. Getting the sound at source makes recording easier. That's the first step."

Evidently, there is some housekeeping to do before we get anywhere near the mics, then. A successful recording depends on a guitar that can do the job. An hour saved in prep is worth double in the heat of battle, so take the time to do an in-depth play-through and really listen to what's going on with the instrument. Is the tuning slipping? Is the intonation out as you move up the neck? Are you getting buzzing or dead notes? In short, does the guitar in its current state sound like how you imagine the end results to be? If not, then this probably needs addressing before you press record. Forget the targeted ad for the Turd Polisher 3000 plug-in you saw on Instagram this morning. This is real life. Go get a setup.

Having ensured the instrument itself is performing as hoped, we must turn our attention to the player. Time for some detailed listening and some more questions: are the nails on the fretting hand short enough to ensure clean and accurate fingering? How frictionless is the attack? Are you hearing string squeak or other extraneous noise? It may not bother you now, but the moment you slap a compressor on the track it will take your head off. Does the player make any non-musical noises? A creaky chair may add verisimilitude to an acoustic blues recording, but wheezing, grunting, farting, moaning along with the melody, foot stomping and stomach noises do not. Ask me how I know.

As with everything, preparation is always the key to getting a good-sounding recording

PHOTO BY NEIL GODWIN

Flat Baroque

The vast majority of us do not have the luxury of a dedicated recording space – as such, proper care and attention must be paid to the sound within the room. Proximity to flat surfaces such as walls and windows will have an effect on your results. Legend has it that Robert Johnson was recorded in the corner of a room facing the wall. I have tried this myself, but I've never quite managed to get the same intensity of results – maybe it was the source after all…

Berlin-based engineer Kian Moghaddamzadeh spends much of his working days piloting the 56-track SSL desk at Hansa Studios (U2, Coldplay, Yungblud), but offers the following words of encouragement to home-recordists.

"The nice thing about recording at home is that you don't have the same time pressure as you do in a big studio," he says. "Aside from that, the same rules apply. So much depends on the space, the instrument and also what sound you're after – whether the guitar should stand on its own or fit in a larger context.

"Once you start experimenting you can begin to build up a personal library of sounds and textures that work for you," he adds. "That makes it much easier to get creative later with instrument and mic choice later on."

PHOTO BY JOSEPH BRANSTON

Mic position is a crucial part of any acoustic recording, whether at home or in a studio

Close To You

So your guitar sounds good (only you can assess what this means), and the room is working in your favour. But what about mic positioning? I remember a conversation with Windham Hill founder and producer Will Ackerman who described the process of capturing the sound of Michael Hedges' *Aerial Boundaries* with an array of mics all positioned alarmingly close to the instrument.

Close mic'ing was certainly a game-changer for me in the early days, but do you need more than one? I asked another guiding light of acoustic production – Hernan Romero (Al Di Meola, Paco de Lucía) for his take.

"A creaky chair may add verisimilitude to an acoustic blues recording, but wheezing, grunting and stomach noises do not"

"I use the same technique whether I'm recording a Conde Hermanos flamenco guitar or a steel-string fretless: it's just one mic, that's all you really need," he tells us. "I use an Earthworks SR30 and also use the space between the soundhole and the body join as a guide – kind of like an EQ slider. The closer you get to the soundhole, the more full and bass-heavy the results. Get closer to the neck and things get clearer. Some say you should aim for the body join or 12th fret – I find that too thin – and I position the mic about six to eight inches away. This lets me work the details and dynamics of the performance."

This is just the start, but by paying attention to the three esses – 'Source', 'Space' and 'So where does this mic go?' – we can avoid anguish down the line. Whether you're Bill Leader tracking Bert Jansch's guitar on a reel-to-reel in a 1960s Camden flat or Shawn Everett and Jonathan Rado putting a wall of acoustic splendour behind Miley Cyrus on a Top 10 hit, the principles remain the same. And there's something rather beautiful about that. **G**

THREE TO GET READY

It's not all about the gear, but...

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Chord Names: 11ths (PART 2)

For this month's chord exploration, **Richard Barrett** shows how 11th extensions deviate from the usual naming conventions

The world of extended chords can appear quite unfathomable at times. The apparently benign 11th chord is a great example of this, as it falls between the cracks of many chord-naming conventions, inhabiting a world of its own.

As you may know, extended chords go beyond the basic major or minor triad, adding the 7th (or ♭7th), 9th, 11th and finally the 13th. In music theory books, this usually happens neatly in ascending scale order and we hear increasingly beautiful, complex chords as we go.

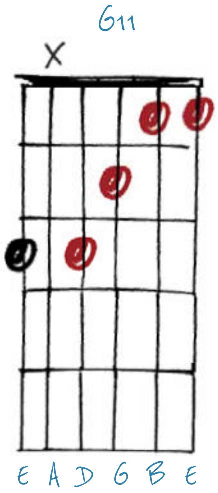
However, chords can become a little too 'dense' harmonically once we get to those 11th and 13th extensions, so the 3rd and 5th are very often omitted. Add this to the fact that we can't physically play that many notes at once on the guitar (let alone in scale order…), and you will see that we need to carefully think about what we can do without, while still meeting the theoretical requirement of such chords. See the examples for further explanation!

Steve Hackett uses plenty of extended chords/harmony in his electric, acoustic and classical playing

PHOTO BY KEVIN NIXON/CLASSIC ROCK MAGAZINE

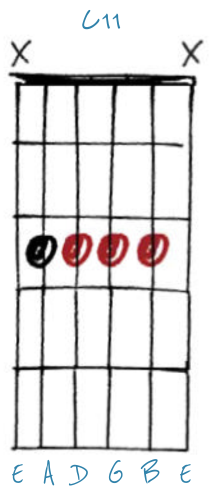
Example 1

G11 is a movable example of how such chords are arranged. In theory, a G11 chord would contain Root-3rd-5-♭7-9-11 or G-B-D-F-A-C in the key of G. It fairly successfully includes all notes (from low to high): Root (G)-♭7th (F)-9th (A)-11th (C). The F on the first string is a duplicate ♭7. For practical and harmonic reasons, the 3rd (B) is omitted. Sometimes this is called F/G.



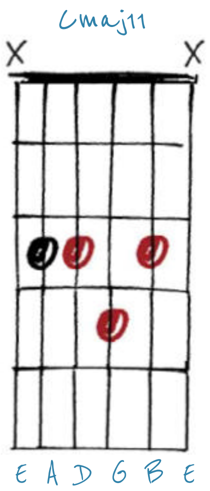
Example 2

This C11 is a good example of stripping an extended chord down to the essentials, partly due to necessity and partly for clarity. Instead of the six-note 'stack' of Root-3rd-5th-♭7th-9th-11th (C-E-G-B♭-D-F), we consolidate to Root-11th-♭7th-9th (C-F-B♭=D) in ascending order. The 3rd (E) is omitted, as is the 5th (G), but this could be added on the first string if desired aka B♭/C.



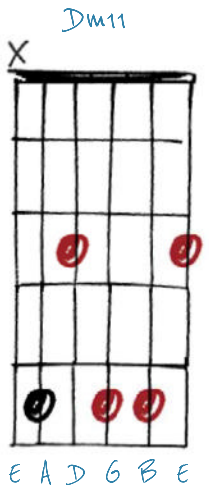
Example 3

So far we've been building 11th chords using the dominant or ♭7th, but we can also do this with a major 7th. In this case, the C11 from Example 2 is changed to a Cmaj11 by raising the ♭7th (B♭) to a B natural. This major 7th is what gives the 'maj' part of the chord its name.



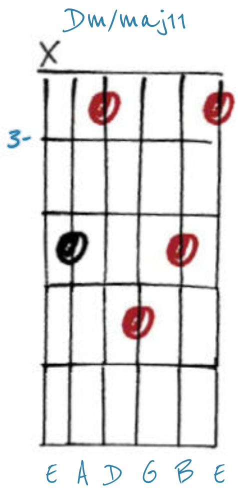
Example 4

We can build an 11th chord from a minor triad, too, as this Dm11 demonstrates. In theory, a min11 chord is built from Root-♭3rd-5th-♭7th-9th-11th (D-F-A-C-E-G) in this key. Looking at the chord diagram, we do actually have everything apart from the 5th (A) – and in scale order to boot!



Example 5

In Example 3, we built a maj11 chord starting with a major triad. If we raise the ♭7th in our Dm11 from Example 4, we get this somewhat dramatic-sounding Dm/maj11. It's a little bit of a twist for the fingers as well as the brain, but hopefully it demonstrates the thinking behind some of those mysterious chord-naming conventions!



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STAR LETTER

GOLD FINGERS?

Mesa/Boogie Mark VII: one of a host of amps through which Geoff has found his sound

I am 72 (going on 32) and have been playing guitar for around 55 years now. As my playing days are pretty much over (sadly, my wife has Alzheimer's), I have been listening to old cassettes, vinyl and CDs that I have done over the years and what has struck me is that, throughout all that time, I have pretty much sounded the same.

I have been lucky enough to own virtually every bit of gear I have ever wanted. Now, whatever amp I have been playing through, from my first Hiwatt Custom 50 (£69 new, signed by Dave Reeves in pencil inside, in around 1969) to my Fenders, Marshalls, Orange, H&K, Vox, Roland, Boss, et cetera, to my recent Mesa/Boogie Mark VII and my Helix Floor with a pair of FRFRs, I still sound almost the same. I must have a certain tone in my head that I'm searching for and each time I buy some new bit of gear I must think I've found it.

'That tone' must have cost me thousands of pounds over the years, so next time you buy some new gear in search of your sonic nirvana, you may already have it, but you just don't know it. The sound was in your fingers all the time.
Geoff Collins

We absolutely agree, Geoff. There's a saying that 'it's the wizard, not the wand' that comes to mind here. Dep ed David Mead recalls a time he was interviewing Steve Vai and David had taken one of his own guitars along to the interview as they were going to be discussing technique and it was assumed Steve wouldn't have a guitar with him as it was just an ordinary press event. During the interview, Steve said, "Here, hand me your guitar," and when he picked it up he sounded instantly like Steve Vai. But here's the punchline – the guitar wasn't plugged in. So Steve was only playing acoustically: no amp, no effects, nothing. So if that doesn't prove that an individual's sound resides in the fingers of the player, then nothing will!

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FIRST KISS

The February 1997 edition of *Guitarist* changed my life for sure. The magazine came with a free CD with *Shout It Out Loud* by KISS, live from Tiger Stadium, included. I was hooked. I'd been playing guitar for two years, but I was still only immersed in The Beatles, Oasis, Hendrix and Jimmy Page. So, as soon as I could, I bought *Alive!* and that was it: Ace Frehley was my hero. I missed the KISS reunion tour due to being too young to travel, but I did get a chance to see them in 2008 in Manchester, unfortunately without Ace, but still, it was an amazing moment in my life. Luckily, I managed to take my son to watch KISS in 2019 and I'm so glad he got to experience what I did.

Your magazine constantly opens my eyes to new music, gear and guitarists: Greta Van Fleet, Sam Fish, Joe Bonamassa… Without your magazine I'd never have been exposed to such joys and talent and I'd never have been exposed to Ace. He was a huge part of my life and he'll always remain so. Learning his playable but amazing-sounding solos was how I spent my teens. But reading your magazine was how I found him.

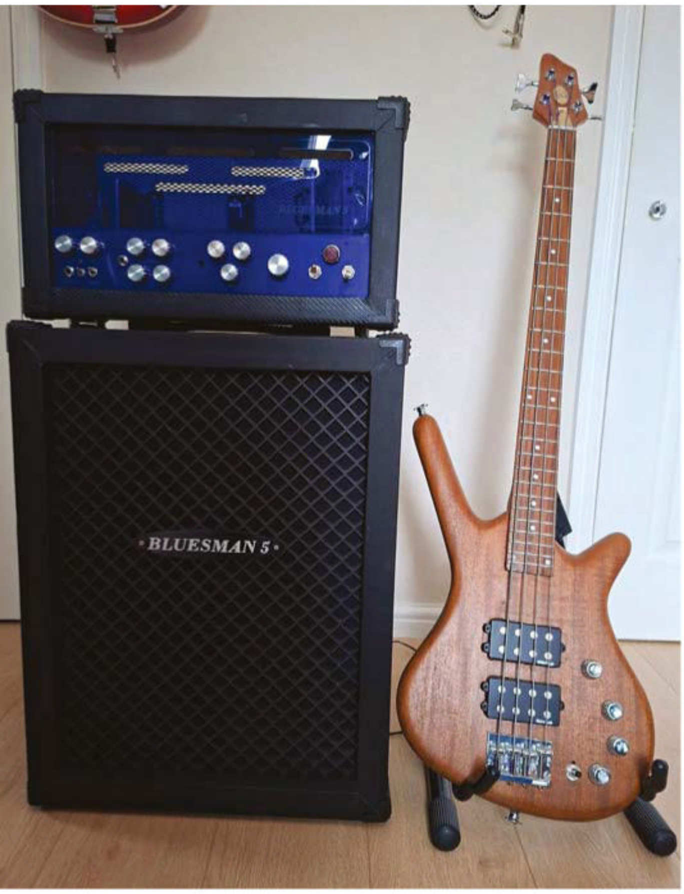
So thanks, *Guitarist*, and thanks, Ace. I'm sure I'm not the only one who you've had such an influence on. And, *Guitarist*, you've cost me a fortune in gear!
Phil Watson

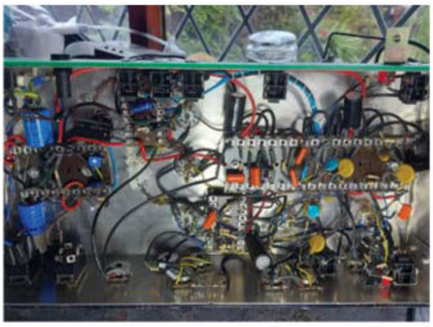
We're always delighted when we hear that the magazine has helped introduce readers to new players, and it's great that you discovered KISS and Ace's playing way back in the 1990s through the portal of this humble tome. And to think that your admiration for the late Ace's playing is still a thing that persists even to this day. As to us costing you a fortune in gear, well, what can we say? Guilty as charged. But we hope that we have helped guide you towards the equipment that has proved right for you and has significantly enriched your guitar journey – and will continue to do so long into the future.

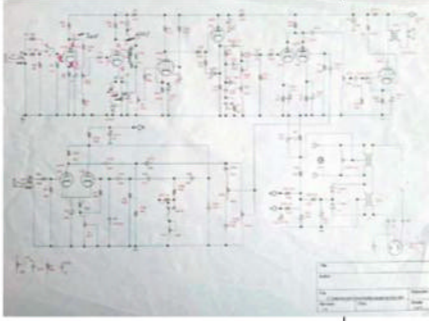
AMPING UP

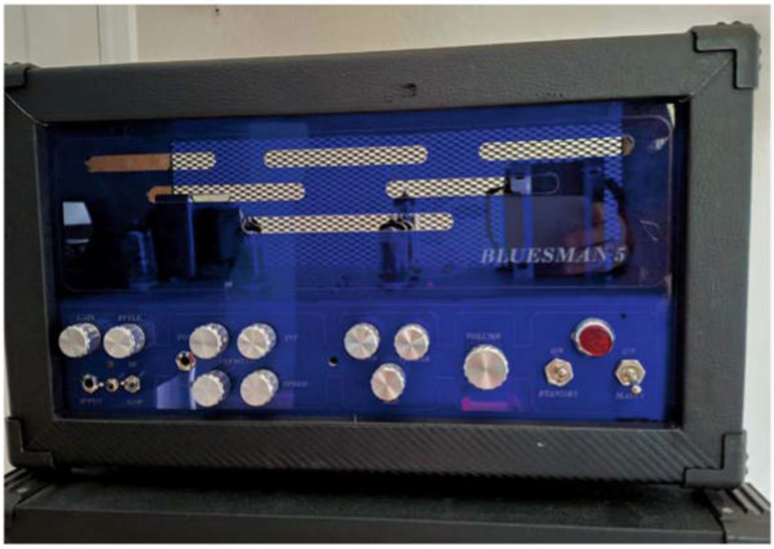
As a regular reader of *Guitarist* for many years, I have noticed many fine home-built guitars but no DIY amp builds. This is my rig [pictured opposite], all self-built – the bass is made from old school desks. I started making valve-based projects at 16. I'm now 74, and 10 years ago decided to have a go at making a Class A five-watt amp. This is the result. Valves used are ECC83 x3, ECf80 x1 and EL84 x1. Two channels: a high gain and a Vibrato channel.

I found a book, *Designing Tube Preamps For Guitar And Bass* [by Merlin Blencowe, Wem Publishing],









Reader Bryan Gazey proudly sent in pictures of his self-built rig: a Class A five-watt valve amp and a bass that repurposed an old school desk. Great work!

which was invaluable, if any of your readers are thinking of having a go.
Bryan Gazey

You're absolutely right, Bryan, we don't see that many amps being self-built by readers. Congratulations on your build – and the school desk bass. Thanks for the tip on the book. Anyone else turned their hands to amp building?

BUCKING THE TREND

Earlier this year, my 22-year-old son told me that he had met a band in a Newcastle bar one evening but said I probably hadn't heard of them. The band in question was Cardinal Black who had been performing in Newcastle and he seemed a little surprised when I told him that I did know of them. I explained that, although I was not familiar with their music, Chris Buck featured in *Guitarist* magazine fairly regularly and had some impressive content on YouTube.

We noted that Cardinal Black were returning to Newcastle in the autumn of this year, so with a common interest, we decided to attend their gig at the Wylam Brewery. The band was great and, although not my son's normal genre, he commented that Chris Buck's onstage personality shone through. And it did; his feel, touch and technique were amazing. He played guitar like it should be played, with a smile on his face and an almost boyish enthusiasm, as if it were both his first and last ever gig.

I also play guitar in a gigging band, playing the pubs around the North East most weekends, and sometimes there are periods when it can start to feel a bit routine. But having watched Chris play that night, I needed to remind myself that it is a privilege to play the guitar and even more so to perform live. So I have made a note to myself that, the next time I feel a bit of complacency creeping in – be more Chris.
Dr Ian Craig

We've been following Chris Buck's career in the magazine for years and, like you, think his rise to prominence in Cardinal Black is richly deserved. He shares many of the characteristics we find in all masters of the instrument: a seemingly never-ending stream of inventive ideas, delivered with the type of finesse that many of us can only dream of. Oh, and we think that 'Be More Chris' should be on a t-shirt, too.

LEARNING CURVE

Kudos to Neville Marten for his piece 'The Learning Curve' [in issue 530], he could have written my history as a guitarist! Not only did I turn down my mother's offer of piano lessons when I was a kid, but I, too, have wangled my way through bands and various numbers over the years without being able to read the dots. And, like Neville, I find learning new numbers more of a challenge these days, to the extent that after a good rehearsal last week I still managed to fluff a few numbers at the subsequent gig. My next step? Push the dog off the sofa and have my Strat beside me instead.
David Hughes

Neville's words have sent many head a-nodding in recognition of similar musical indiscretions hereabouts. The woodshed welcomes us all!

Below: Mr Buck's talent, enthusiasm and warm stage presence inspired reader Dr Ian Craig to 'be more Chris'

Send Your letters to the *Guitarist* editor. Drop us a line at guitarist@futurenet.com

STEVE STEVENS

Best known as Billy Idol's collaborator of 40-plus years, Steve Stevens transcends the punk-rock guitarist mould, taking in flamenco, jazz-fusion, prog and classical styles – and he remains as excited about guitar today as he was when he first picked one up

Words Charlie Wilkins **Photography** Bruno Talledo

THE Guitarist INTERVIEW

Whether igniting Billy Idol's biggest anthems or unleashing fiery flamenco on his own, Steve Stevens has never played it safe and never stood still. More than 40 years into his career, he remains sharp as ever. As Idol's long-time right-hand man and collaborator, Stevens helped define the sound of the 80s but refuses to be just a relic of that era.

With a recent Billy Idol album, an ambitious tour and new signature gear, he continues to set stages ablaze with the same passion and precision that made him a guitar hero. Here, Stevens joins us to reveal how he's been able to stay relevant in an ever-changing musical landscape.

The latest Billy Idol album, *Dream Into It*, dropped earlier this year. Has your songwriting process evolved over the years?

"As far as Billy and I go, nothing's really changed: it's still two guys in a room with acoustic guitars. We've always felt that if a song works acoustically, you've got something. If it only works once you layer technology on top, maybe it's not strong enough. That's always been our litmus test. But we also had other collaborators this time like our producer Tommy English, plus Joe Janiak, who we've worked with before, and Nick Long, who we had worked with a little bit in the past. These guys are younger, but they grew up with Billy Idol's catalogue. They're excited about the legacy and they know how to bring in elements from the past without just recycling it. That kept things fresh."

What unexpected influences found their way onto the record?

"One of the bands that influenced me and Billy early on was Suicide, the New York duo of Alan Vega and Marty Rev. When Billy first moved to New York, we must have seen them three or four times. They had this primitive, lo-fi electronic thing going. So when we used synths or drum machines on this album, we wanted them to feel stripped-down, raw and almost primitive. These days, plug-ins can sound massive, so we went the opposite direction and

Pictured here in '83, Steve and Billy Idol found influence in NYC bands such as Suicide in the early 80s

PHOTO BY BILL TOMPKINS/GETTY IMAGES

kept it small. Those raw textures worked really well with my guitars.

"Lyrically, Billy wanted the songs to reflect his life story. We knew he had a biopic film coming out this year [*Billy Idol Should Be Dead*], so it made sense to tie the record to his journey. Even though I wasn't with him back in England where he started, I've certainly been there since he arrived in New York. Here we are 42 years later, still working together, so there's a lot of shared life experiences to draw on."

How did you approach your guitar tones for this record?

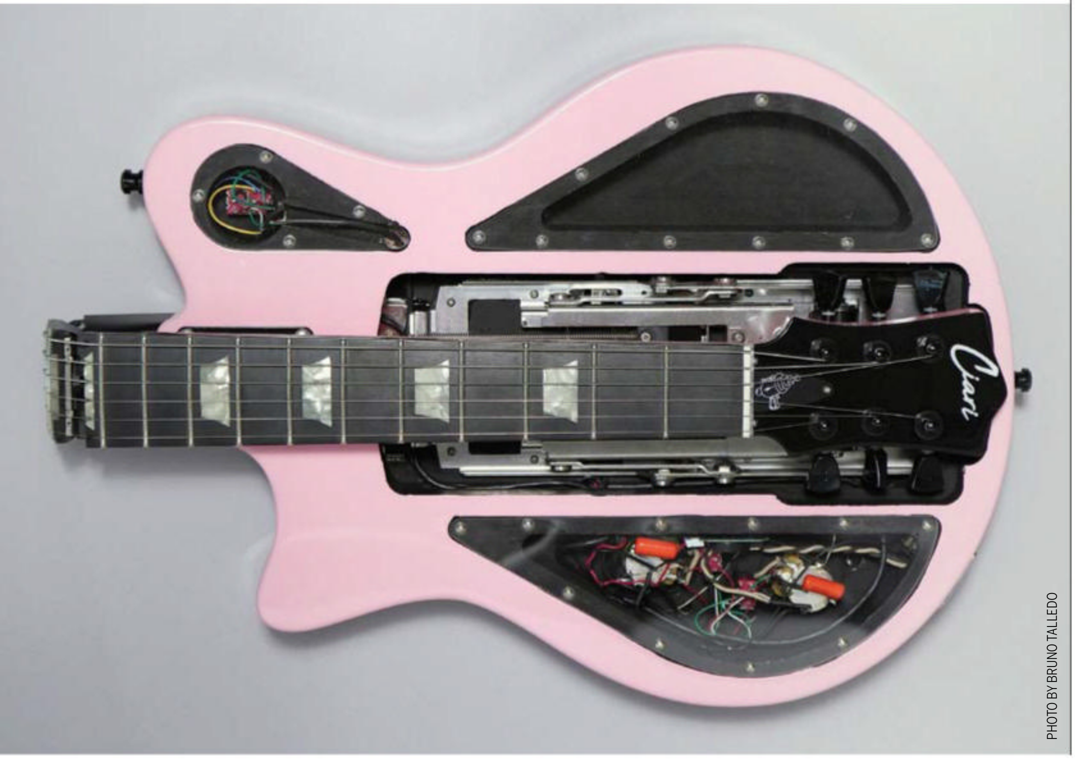
"I'm old-school, so I like to just plug straight into an amp. I've got my Friedman Steve Stevens signature head and my Knaggs guitars. Where I did experiment was in creating soundscapes. Since we didn't want keyboards dominating the record, I used plug-ins and effects to get textures with the guitar. That was kind of the concept even back on *Rebel Yell*. We started recording it back in '83 when all these records were out with tons of keyboards and we didn't want to sound like everyone else. I remember telling our producer, Keith Forsey, 'Let me try it on guitar first. If it doesn't work, then we'll add keys.' And most of the time, guitars carried the weight."

Live, how do you approach material from albums such as *Charmed Life* and *Cyberpunk* that you didn't play on originally?

"Funny enough, I'm usually the one saying I want to do tunes off those albums because I love interpreting them; it's almost like doing a cover song. I mean, I'm a Billy Idol fan as well as his guitar player. I remember when we did *Prodigal Blues* from *Charmed Life*, we played an acoustic version and I approached it almost like a Ry Cooder tune. Billy said, 'Wow, where did you get that idea?' and I just told him, 'I listened to the song and that's the way I heard it.' We do that a lot. I get to reinterpret the songs, sometimes even using a guitar synth, and it's such a great challenge."

Tell us about your new Ciari Steve Stevens Signature travel guitar.

"I came across a video of this folding guitar that fit into a backpack. I understand mechanical design a little bit so I thought, 'Wow, this looks cool.' As a touring musician, I always have my laptop and a guitar with me for writing, laying down tracks and even recording stuff for other artists, but I've always been nervous about travelling with a guitar and checking it at the airport as baggage. The Ciari guitar looked like a great solution.



Designed to be touring- and travel-friendly, Steve Steven's lightweight Ciari Signature Series Ascender guitars feature a patented folding mechanism and floating tailpiece. Kool & The Gang guitarist Amir Bayyan and Johnny Marr are also fans of the model

PHOTO BY BRUNO TALLEDO

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Steve Stevens takes us through some of his collection

1 **CIARI** STEVE STEVENS ASCENDER

"From the very first meeting with Jonathan at Ciari, [my wife] Josie said, 'That's a really cool guitar. Can you make it in pink?" Jonathan agreed on the spot – and Josie Pink was born. It's a bold statement: if you're going to play, you might as well be noticed. Fender's pink finishes were hugely popular in the 50s, so there's some historical precedent, too."

2 **GIBSON** LES PAUL SILVERBURST

"I got the idea for this guitar after seeing a Lady Gaga performance about 18 years ago – her guitarist was playing a rhinestoned Les Paul Silverburst and it blew me away. I found a mid-90s Silverburst on eBay, bought it and sent it to the guy who did the rhinestone work, Robert Kantor, for the conversion. The result is this showpiece that I use for *Eyes Without A Face*. During the heavy middle section, the guitar has to be as visually commanding as it is sonically, and this one never fails – it's impossible to take your eyes off it. It's loaded with mid-70s Gibson etched-cover pickups, which are highly collectible now. Back then, I scored them on eBay for a good deal."

3 **GODIN** ACS

"This is my main steel-string acoustic on stage, which even glows in the dark. I use it for everything acoustic, from the intro of *Eyes Without A Face* to duo shows with Billy. It replicates the warmth and resonance of a big acoustic guitar, with the added bonus of synth access."

4 **GODIN** LGXT

"This early-2000s Godin LGXT can do everything but make you coffee. It has synth access pickups, acoustic bridge pickups and traditional electrics all in one. I use it for *Flesh For Fantasy* where I need to trigger horn stabs and maintain a super-clean rhythm sound."

5 **KNAGGS** STEVE STEVENS SSC

"The SSC is my most recent Knaggs signature model. I asked them to build it so it felt like I'd owned it for about five years – broken in but not fully reliced. It's incredibly comfortable and it's become my main live guitar; I use it on about eight songs a night."

6 **SUHR** CLASSIC T

"I've known John Suhr longer than I've known Billy Idol – over 45 years now. Back in the day, he was the repairman at Rudy's Music on 48th Street in New York before he started making guitars out of his own shop. I use this one for *Hot In The City* because it has a more Nashville, country-tinged tone that works perfectly for the song."

GUITAR PHOTO 1 BY BRUNO TALLEDO

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GUITAR PHOTOS 2-6 BY JANE STUART

"I contacted [Ciari Guitars founder] Jonathan Spangler whose background was in [medical device technology], and I thought, 'How do you go from that to designing guitars?' [Laughs] But the mechanics were incredible.

"I started travelling with one, and eventually Jonathan asked if I'd be interested in doing a signature model. We put in custom Bare Knuckle [Ray Gun] pickups made exclusively for this guitar along with an ebony fingerboard, coil-taps and even a tuner built into the pickup ring. It's invaluable on the road and I use it on stage for our encore every night."

You've been in the spotlight for decades now. What's been the key to staying relevant without chasing trends?
"I think it's always been cool to *like* Billy Idol, and our records were never something you could pigeonhole. I came from the rock side with guitar heroes like Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix, a little prog, some new wave and New York punk. Then you have Billy with the punk-rock/Elvis thing, and our early producer Keith Forsey came from working with [Italian composer] Giorgio Moroder on dance records like Donna Summer. So, because we've always had this gumbo of different styles, we were never pigeonholed when it came to writing music.

Over the years, Steve has taken inspo from 60s rock, flamenco, 70s synths, classical scores and film arrangements

PHOTO BY ROBERT KNIGHT ARCHIVE/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

"Even though we had our biggest success in the 80s, Billy's roots go back to 1977 London. I think that's served us really well. He's got a timeless image and people appreciate that. He's a real-deal rock 'n' roll star. Honestly, we sound better now than we did back then."

"One of the unique things about my style is how I was influenced by early synthesizers and keyboard sounds from the 70s"

You've worked on many side projects over the years.
"I was fortunate in the 80s because, as a sideman, people approached me probably more than if I'd been tied to a band. I got offers from Robert Palmer, Joni Mitchell, Michael Jackson and, of course, *Top Gun*. I was able to do all those one-offs while still working with Billy.

"I like working with artists outside my comfort zone. For example, I worked with Ben Watkins [of Juno Reactor] on soundtracks like *Once Upon A Time In Mexico* and *The Matrix*. I love his records and wanted to understand how they were made, like sampling, loops and all that early 90s electronic stuff. I like working with flamenco players and world artists, too. The worst thing would be if someone asks me to do something for them that sounds like *Rebel Yell*. That's exclusive to Billy Idol and I don't want to retread; I turn down those requests."

Speaking of flamenco, didn't you do a flamenco record at one point?
"Yes, it's called *Flamenco A Go-Go*, released in 1999. After a run playing with Vince Neil, opening for Van Halen for about six weeks, it just got to be total rock 'n' roll excess [laughs]. I came off the road and had to reassess why I was even playing guitar. One of my first loves is flamenco and my first guitar teacher was a flamenco guitarist. I remember going to see Paco de Lucía and that reignited this spark in me. I stopped playing electric guitar for a year. I went to Japan, France and England to make that record and travelled the world with just my nylon-string guitar."

When you're playing genres other than rock, do you feel more creatively challenged?
"Absolutely. One of the unique things about my style is how I was influenced by early synthesizers and keyboards like Keith Emerson with The Nice, Rick Wakeman, all that stuff. A lot of my guitar ideas come from keyboard sounds from the 70s. Same with flamenco rhythms applied to my acoustic work. I also listen to a lot of film scores and classical music. Their arrangements are incredible. For me, being a successful guitarist is about coming up with parts that move the song along and not just doubling the bass line. I always want a guitar part that's independent."

Are you consciously thinking 'keyboards' when you're playing or does it just happen naturally?
"Definitely consciously. Take the middle of *Rebel Yell*, during the 'I walk the world' section. That guitar line is me thinking of Emerson's *Lucky Man* solo [Emerson, Lake & Palmer]. I'm not thinking guitar. Same with orchestral-style chord voicings. On *Flesh for Fantasy*, for example, those chords are influenced by Allan Holdsworth but also by Rick Wakeman's use of 9ths and 7ths. I never just play straight major or minor. There's always something extra."

You've worked with many different artists over the years. Who else is on your bucket list?
"Peter Gabriel. I love everything he's done and I think he would be incredible to collaborate with. I enjoy working with artists that have influenced me. I got to share a stage with Neil Young once. When I got my first decent acoustic guitar, I played a lot of his stuff so it was amazing to play on stage with him. What's important, especially after decades, is not forgetting that feeling you had when you first picked up the instrument. You can't let mortgages or taxes creep into your head. You've got to stay excited."

After four decades of working with Billy Idol, Steve Stevens remains a fan as well as being his right-hand man

PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME

Thinking back to the 80s, there was a lot of pressure to be able to shred, but you didn't really fall into that.
"I wasn't from LA. I didn't grow up watching Van Halen thinking, 'Oh shit, what do we do now?' A lot of guys did. Eddie shook up the world, no doubt. I became friends with him later, but I never wanted to play like him. Record labels were signing anyone who could tap and shred. The good ones, like Warren DeMartini and George Lynch, found their own voices, unlike guys that were just Eddie clones.

"But, really, my true love is collaborating on a good song. I'm definitely not looking for my moment of glory three minutes into a song, waiting for the guitar solo. I enjoy being part of the band more than anything and having that dialogue with the guys on stage, playing and locking in with the drummer."

Dave Friedman claims you were very hands-on when it came to designing the Steve Stevens signature amp.
"[Laughs] Yeah, Dave and I go way back, before he was even building amps. I'd moved to LA and my live rig was in bad shape so he rebuilt it for me. It started as a good Marshall 'Plexi'-inspired amp with a great master volume. Then we expanded by adding a clean channel and we just kept refining it from there.

"To my ears, I'm just replicating my favourite early 70s records, especially the English ones and the glam stuff like T. Rex, Bowie, Sweet. Those records always had amazing guitar sounds. Those are the guitar sounds that I like to hear."

Tell us about your touring rig.
"Dave Friedman built my rig for this tour, [it's] all pedals now. I use a Fractal FM3 for delays, chorus and harmonies, a custom wah from Oxbow Studios that nails the Hendrix-era Vox sound, and I've also got the Rockaway pedal that I designed with J Rockett, which is like a Klon but with a graphic EQ. Also there's a couple of Ernie Ball volume pedals, a ring mod sequencer… I change things a lot. That's the fun part about using pedals. It's easy to switch stuff in and out.

"We're using in-ears, so no cabs on stage. I worked closely with several companies to develop my own IRs [impulse responses]. I went to front-of-house and compared my mic'd cabs to the IRs, and the IRs sounded better. A lot of players fool themselves with their stage sound and don't realise that the audience is not hearing what they're hearing. With IRs and a great front-of-house guy, my live tone is more consistent record-quality. I used to hate in-ears, but I've learned how to make them work using specific reverbs, house mics blended into the mix and other little tricks. Now I can hear everything clearly without blasting my ears."

> "Seeing Paco de Lucía reignited this spark. I stopped playing electric guitar for a year and travelled the world with my nylon-string"

Don't you miss that wall of sound behind you?
"I'm 66 years old – I'm too old for that now [laughs]."

Billy Idol's latest album, *Dream Into It*, is available now on Dark Horse Records/BMG
www.stevestevensguitar.com

GEAR *Of The* YEAR

THE BEST GUITARS, AMPS & PEDALS OF 2025

It's the time of year when we look back over the previous 12 months and select the gear that has impressed our team of reviewers the most. The contenders, as always, are drawn from the body of guitars, amps and effects that have secured either a *Guitarist* Choice award or a top-of-the-class 10/10 Gold medal. In other words, all the gear you'll find hopping up onto the winners' podium in the following pages is, quite literally, the best in class and has been selected for inclusion based on its innovation, sound quality and overall playability. As we've found previously, the champion's league is populated by some familiar faces and, quite refreshingly, a few newcomers, too. Overall, it's been a pretty good year...

Words David Mead **Photography** Phil Barker

VOX
JWJ

MAINSTREAM ELECTRICS

In spite of rising prices, the affordable electric market remains in rude health

Words: ***Dave Burrluck***

Vintage REVO Galactica

The REVO range, which stands for REtro Vintage Originals, launched back in 2024, designed by Alan Entwistle and made in China. What impressed us about the range was the fabulous attention to detail and, in many cases, the unusual circuitry that's often based on original models from the 60s. The mini-humbucker-loaded Galactica might be inspired by the Höfner Galaxy, but the multi-switching guitar also features Entwistle's five-way rotary ATN 5 passive filter circuit. "If these REVO models aim to offer something a little different," said our review, "with vibey and diverse sounds for not a lot of money, well, they succeed!"

Price: ***£649*** *Website:* ***www.vintageguitarsrus.com***

PRS SE NF 53

Like the original USA-made NF 53 model, this SE version takes loose inspiration from the Telecaster and reinvents it for a very different ride. As ever, it's the SE's detailed build that hooked us, with a swamp ash body and a pretty beefy-feeling maple neck – with the full Fender scale length, rather than PRS's shorter 635mm (25 inches) – that's big in your hand and was perfectly set up and ready to go. The top-loading 'plate style' bridge with its brass saddles mirrors the USA model and the Narrowfield DD 'S' soapbars are Indonesian-made versions of the USA design that sit between classic single coils and beefier humbuckers: a major part of the immense appeal.

Price: ***£799*** *Website:* ***www.prsguitars.com***

Epiphone Bonehead Riviera

Of the trio of Oasis signature guitars launched as the band's reunion tour comes to a close (which also comprised the Gibson Noel Gallagher Les Paul Standard and Epiphone Masterbilt Gem Archer Sheraton), this Riviera is most relevant to their story as it very tidily replicates Bonehead's '84 Japanese-made Epiphone that featured at the beginning of the band and is still used today. The guitar we spent time with was a great example with a good weight, very tidy build and almost instant 'early Oasis' voice from the Epiphone Alnico Classic Pro bridge humbucker. But it's way more than that: a versatile 'ES-335' with 60s style, big and ringing, and no slouch for your blues jam. That's the story.

Price: ***£849*** *Website:* ***www.epiphone.com***

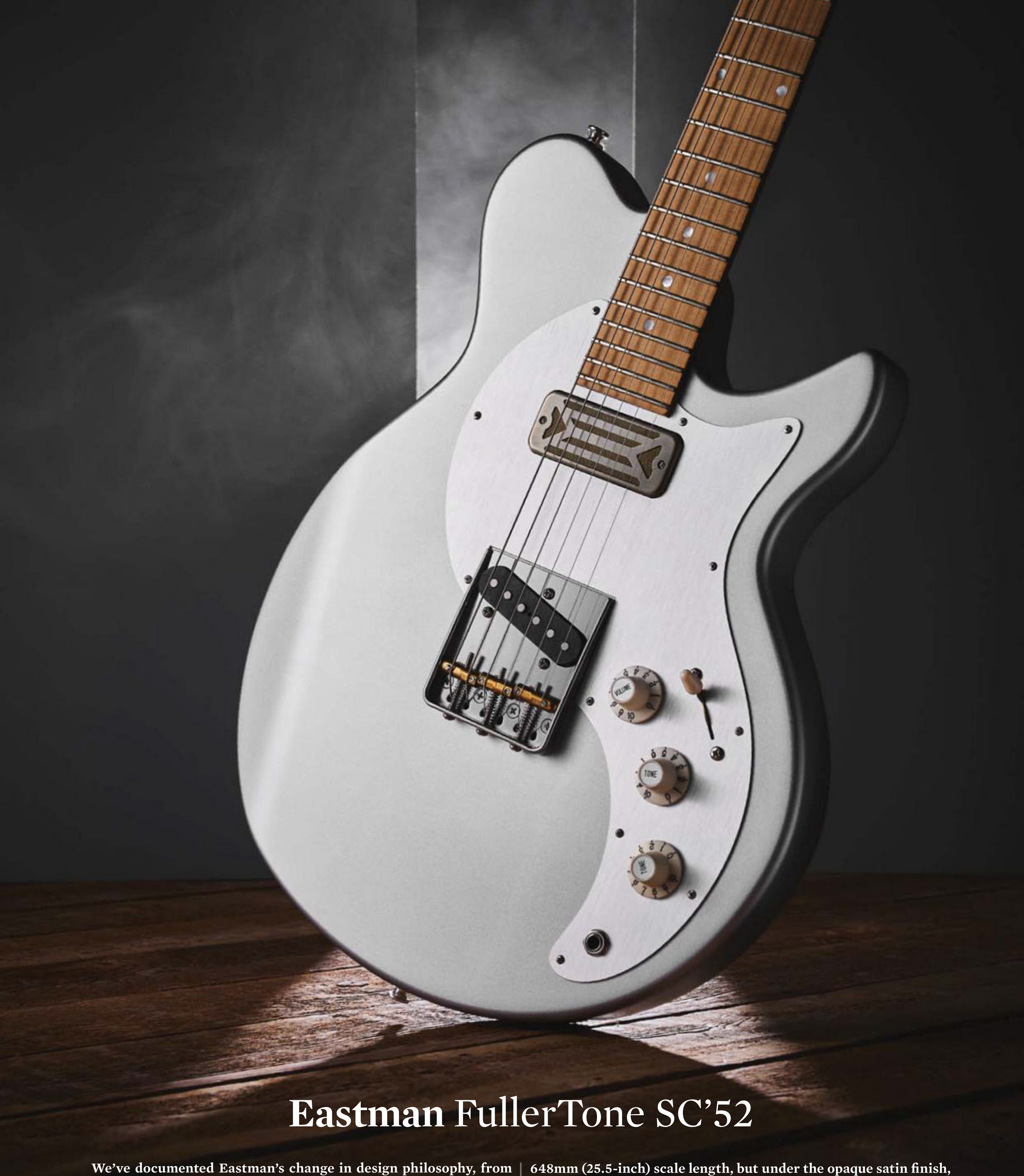
MY YEAR IN GEAR

SOLACE IN TRADITION *by Jamie Dickson*

"This year has been a mixed bag. Just after Christmas 2024, I saw an ad on Facebook Marketplace for a Fender Hot Rod Deville (4x10) version for a crazily low price. Assuming it would be barely functional, I met the seller and was surprised to find – and soon buy – a minty example of the breed from a Bristol studio that hadn't found much use for it. Then, halfway through the year, I resumed my on/off relationship with pedal switching when Dan Steinhardt of The GigRig and *That Pedal Show* fame assembled a new pedalboard, (impeccably) built around the G3 generation of switchers. It's been really enjoyable getting back into the one-touch delights of using groups of pedals via a switcher.

"But my final purchase was far more simple – taking me back to the real fundamentals of guitar. I bought a Spanish-built nylon-string secondhand from Rich Tone Music in Sheffield and I've been playing it ever since. What could be more lo-tech than that? And yet it's been completely absorbing. Sometimes simple really is best."

PHOTO BY JAMIE DICKSON



Eastman FullerTone SC'52

We've documented Eastman's change in design philosophy, from inspired-by instruments to very valid original designs, from the brand's introduction of the Romeo model in 2019. This year's FullerTone guitars might be the best yet and are very affordable versions of the boutique D'Ambrosio USA models from 2024.

The new series takes its name from the unique curved bolt-on neck joint, and its two models – the double-cut DC'62 and this single-cut SC'52 – are sharply made in Eastman's Chinese facility, bringing unique modern retro style to a much more affordable price point. Yes, there's strong Fender inspiration here, with a 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length, but under the opaque satin finish, the bodies unusually feature roasted black limba. The necks are quarter-sawn roasted maple, and our SC'52 was deliciously light weight at 2.92kg (6.42lb). Along with solid hardware, the SC'52 mounts a UK-designed Tonerider TQ1B-BK staggered pole noiseless single-coil humbucker paired with a Soapbar Humbucker in a classy and unique Goldfoil-style cover.

Our review said: "With a real old-school big-neck vibe, these guitars – especially the SC'52 – feel and, to a certain extent, sound like vintage pieces that have already been played in."

***Price:* £799 *Website:* www.eastmanguitars.com**

MAINSTREAM ELECTRICS

Moving into four figures, there's a considerable, very diverse choice of serious electrics

Words: ***Dave Burrluck***

Epiphone Jeff Beck Oxblood 1954 Les Paul

Apart from being a timely reminder of the loss of one of the true guitar greats, the Oxblood's convoluted backstory of what was once a '54 Les Paul (reflected by the one-piece wrapover bridge) adds to the allure. Our sample was a great weight at 3.89kg (8.56lb), with a *huge* neck – "dimensionally, it's the biggest neck of any production guitar we've ever played," said our review – plus superb sounds from the Gibson USA Custombuckers. Yes, a little DIY TLC was needed but nothing major, and it has character in spades. You don't have to have Jeff Beck's chops (we wish!) to enjoy this one. Definitely a stand-out Les Paul of 2025 and one we seriously regret returning.

Price: ***£1,199*** *Website:* ***www.epiphone.com***

Cream T Crossfire Standard

With an offset style that actually recalls the Charvel Surfcaster, this UK build has plenty going for it, not least its Guitar-X pickup-swapping system. At this 'Standard' level, the build – comprising an obeche body with bolt-on maple neck – is lightweight and resonant, and hardware includes a through-strung bridge with rear-locking Gotoh tuners. It comes with dual Cream T Hot Sauce humbuckers, plus an extra Nidge humbucking-sized P-90 style that can be instantly swapped into either neck or bridge position. Cream T offers plenty of Guitar-X mounted pickups and other brands, too: one guitar, a host of possibilities and no soldering required!

Price: ***£1,499*** *Website:* ***www.creamtcustomshop.com***

PRS S2 Mira 594 Satin

A firm PRS fan-favourite, the Mira first appeared back in 2007 as a very stripped-down model that was aimed at a different audience in style and price. Loosely based on the Santana outline, the all-mahogany set-neck build is a 22-fretter with a shorter 625mm (24.594-inch) scale, PRS's Stoptail wrapover bridge and dual 58/15 LT covered humbuckers that can be split to single coil via individual mini-toggle switches. Available at £1,999 with a gloss finish, it's a beautifully crafted, classic-sounding lightweight electric, but in this satin finish, it's a steal. "Perfectly made and timeless-sounding rock 'n' roll guitars. About time…!" we said.

Price: ***£1,699*** *Website:* ***www.prsguitars.com***

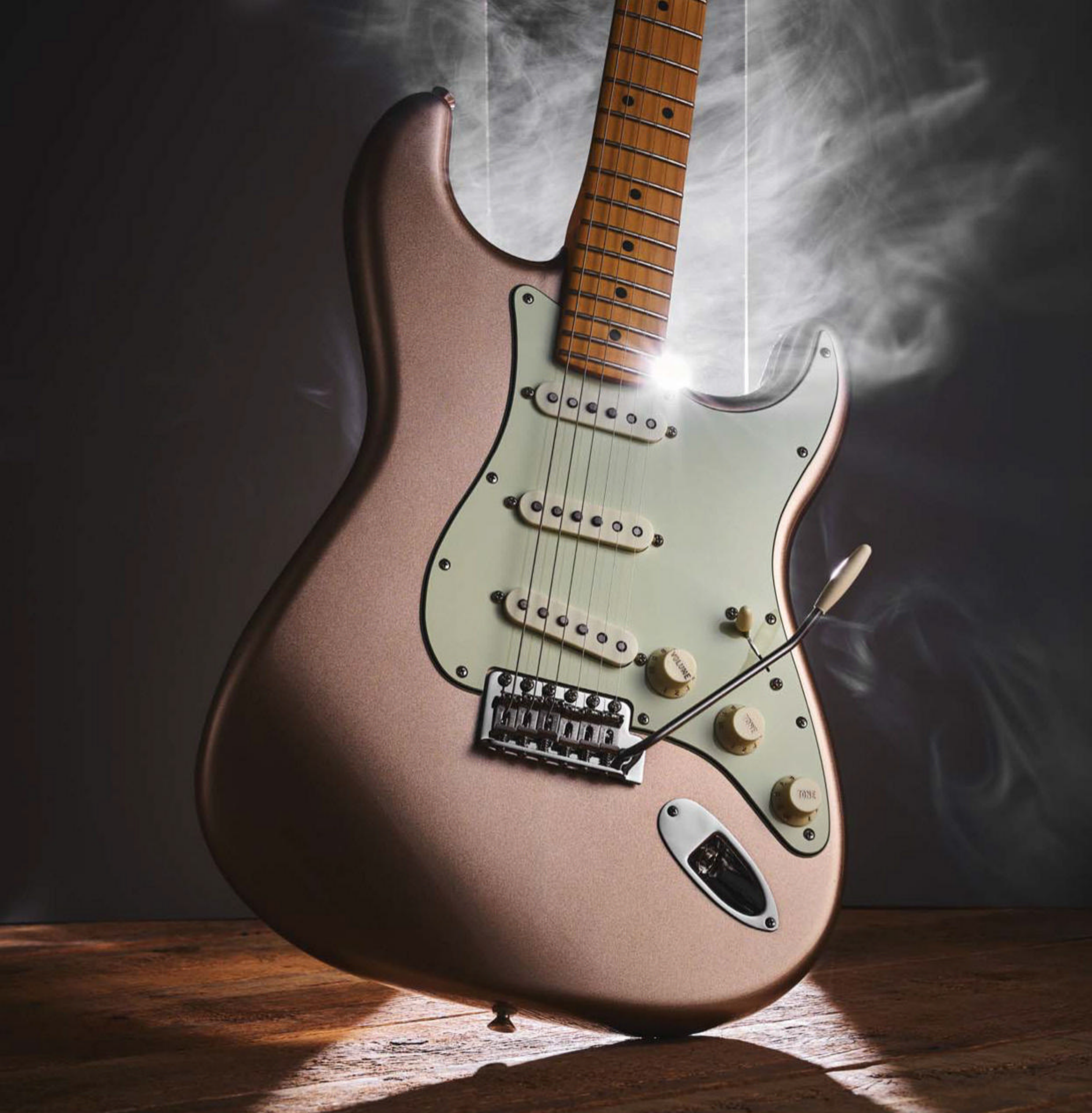
I LEARNED FROM THAT

HEAD VS HEART *by David Mead*

"Around the early summer of 2025 I was shopping for a new amp. It was for a specific purpose as I was once again teaching at the IGF Summer School at Bath Spa University and, having sold my Peavey Delta Blues amp the previous year, I needed to make myself heard in the classroom. When I attended the summer school in '24, I borrowed a Boss Katana-50 EX and was very impressed by how it performed.

"But despite the Katana being top of my shopping list, what I really wanted was a Fender Blues Junior. Head was battling heart – something we've all experienced when buying gear. In the end, however, common sense prevailed and I bought the Katana. My reasoning was that it has onboard effects if I need them, a very capable set of 'edge of break-up' sounds, and the facility to reduce the output to 0.5 watts for neighbour-considerate home use. Head 1: Heart 0. But, as The Stones said, you can't always get what you want…"

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS



Fender American Professional Classic Stratocaster

Replacing the American Performer range that launched in 2019, this year's American Professional Classic series might be seen as 'just another refresh', but after spending time with this Stratocaster, it's clear the start-up USA Fender classic is in very good shape.

While we've seen Fender's new aged-looking 'Heirloom' finish and the (re)return of the Road Worn models, these new American Professional Classics promote 'faded' gloss finishes: our Faded Firemist Gold was rather opulent-looking and very well applied. The 22-fret maple necks are amber tinted with nicely modern medium jumbo frets on the 241mm (9.5-inch) cambered fingerboard face. Hardware encapsulates the modern/vintage recipe, too; the upgraded, modern-mount Kluson-style ClassicGear tuners feature staggered-height posts, and the standard all-steel vibrato has narrower-than-vintage spacing. The new Coastline pickups (simply overwound Pure Vintage '57 Strat single coils) are paired with Greasebucket circuits on both tone controls. With its fast-playing Modern 'C' neck profile and the added oomph – which helps overdriven sounds, as do those tone controls – this new Classic has a very grab-and-go gigging aim. "A real all-rounder modern/vintage hybrid that's impossible to put down," said our review.

Price: ***£1,499*** *Website:* ***www.fender.com***

PRESTIGE ELECTRICS

These exceptional builds from the UK, US and Japan present a very tempting proposition

Words: ***Dave Burrluck***

Manson Mikey Demus Signature MD-3

Long-time fixtures of the UK's vibrant maker community, Manson produces detailed, quality builds that are always a pleasure to feature. This is the third signature for Skindred's Mikey Demus and it really reflects his needs as a hardworking, gigging player. Based on Manson's MA outline, the brand's take on the Telecaster, the obeche body keeps the weight in check, but it's the in-house-made Benchmark+ dual humbuckers that are the treat here, with heat at the bridge and vintage style at the neck. Their secret weapon is the ability to voice either in parallel humbucker wiring: no-hum single-coil-like tones that really expand the voice.

Price: ***£2,099*** *Website:* ***www.mansonguitarworks.com***

Gretsch Professional Series Hollow Body Tennessean

Part of a refresh of Gretsch's Professional Series Hollow Body guitars, this affordable Tennessean might have originally launched in 1958, but here it's full of modern upgrades, not least the all-new Arc-Tone bracing system. The relatively compact 16-inch wide body (the same as an ES-335) features dual Pro-FT Filter'Trons, plus the time-saving string-through Bigsby, master volume with treble bleed circuit and its master no-load tone control. "Beautifully built, [it] plays and feels like a much more modern proposition," said our review, "and supplies all manner of brilliant sounds."

Price: ***£2,399*** *Website:* ***www.gretschguitars.com***

PRS S2 Special Semi-Hollow

In past years, PRS's lower-tier USA S2 level has seemed overlooked, but for 2025 new additions such as the Mira 594 (see page 58) and this versatile Special Semi-Hollow are changing that impression. The more production-efficient S2 with its contoured (not arched) maple-topped semi-hollow mahogany body features the Pattern Regular neck profile, vibrato, Phase III locking tuners with wing 'buttons', plus 58/15 LT covered humbuckers with a Narrowfield humbucker in between. Its five-way selector switch and dual mini-toggles to split the outer humbuckers produce some 12 distinct pickups selections. We said: "The new S2 feels a little less precious – in a good way."

Price: ***£2,899*** *Website:* ***www.prsguitars.com***

MOD SQUAD

ALWAYS LEARNING *by Dave Burrluck*

"Learning how to improve your setup, setting pickup heights, or even swapping a set of tuners are great skills to get under your belt. But building a guitar, albeit from mostly pre-used parts, all in your domestic workspace is another matter – and something I embarked upon this year. With help from Jason Snelling at Maybury Guitars and pickups from Sunbear, finally, in issue 522 I got it finished. I need to go back to school when it comes to the actual finishing, but I (or that should be 'we') created something quite unique, an instrument that looks like a prototype from yesteryear, even though the striped ash top is a recycled chopping board with a reused, hollowed old pine back. The odd thing is that – particularly with those Beartrons, a USA Bigsby and Mastery offset bridge – it has an evocative sound that's become a secret weapon for ongoing recording projects. Bearing in mind I made my first electric guitar in the, ahem, early 70s, I'm still learning and listening, and there's always room for improvement."

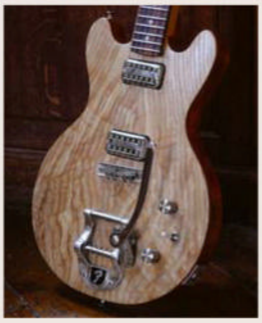


PHOTO BY DAVE BURRLUCK

Fender American Ultra Luxe Vintage '50s Telecaster

Fender's recent modern/vintage theme is brought into sharp focus with the American Ultra Luxe Vintage models, which top the USA production line, price-wise. Replacing the Ultra Luxe mini-range and augmenting the Ultra II series, think very modern but with a vintage appearance. The latter is achieved with Fender's new 'Heirloom' nitro finish, offered in White Blonde or Butterscotch Blonde. It's not reliced but is lower gloss, with plenty of cracking and the occasional minor ding. But this is contrasted by the very modern style, based on the Ultra II, though here the compound radius fingerboard features stainless-steel frets.

Looking at the build, the heel is heavily contoured with a rear scoop behind the treble cutaway, plus we have the Strat's forearm and rear contours. The deep amber-tinted neck is quarter-sawn maple (not slab-sawn), and there are six brass-block saddles on the modern bridge, while the tuners are rear-locking. You'll also find an angled pickup selector, and an S-1 switch that adds neck and bridge in series. While it feels nicely modern and plays superbly, it reverts to Pure Vintage '51 single coils. "It's not really reinventing any wheel," said our review, "and perhaps it's better off for that – a good-sounding, quite classic Tele with that extra bit of oomph if you need it."

Price: ***£2,949*** *Website:* ***www.fender.com***

PRESTIGE ELECTRICS

Not quite into Custom Shop territory, these beautiful builds possess just as much charm

Words: ***Dave Burrluck***

Patrick James Eggle Oz-T Cabronita Thinline

Plenty of small-production high-end makers pile on the posh when it comes to their sumptuous builds, but this Oz-T Cabronita Thinline from one of the UK's most respected makers is almost the opposite. Featuring a new, unique headstock inlay, it has a swamp ash semi-hollow body and shows off the Wide Range-style Mojo humbucker, which can be split from the pull-switch tone control. The feel of the oil/wax finish to the vividly figured roasted maple neck is superb, like pretty much every other detail of this beautifully understated guitar. Our reviewer said: "One pickup, a host of sounds… Another jaw-dropping example of home-grown craft."

Price: ***£3,260*** ***Website:*** ***www.eggle.co.uk***

Lowden GL-J

As a fixture of the acoustic world, George Lowden is held in high regard – but as a maker of electric guitars he's a relative new boy. We fell for the charms of his 2018 single-cut GL-10, and earlier this year a new semi-solid GL-J continued our love affair. It's a sort of downsized ES-335 in outline, with mahogany at its base, showing off a 4A grade Tasmanian blackwood top, all finished in that silky satin hand-rubbed Lowden style. Powered by Lollar Imperial humbuckers, it sounded "regal" according to our review: "There's nothing hot or overwound about what we hear, but likewise no thinness or sharpness – it's a balanced, mature voice with surprising depth."

Price: ***£3,950*** ***Website:*** ***www.lowdenguitars.com***

Ivison Dakota Standard

Ex-guitar-tech turned luthier Neil Ivison and his pickup-making cohort Paul Cross are making around 40 instruments a year, and they've already attracted high-profile use from the likes of Audley Freed and Richard Fortus. By design, the Dakota Standard bound-top we got our hands on looks like a Gibson from the early 60s, particularly with its Firebird-like raised centre and in-house Freedbird mini-hums. And it felt and sounded like one, too. "Seriously good vintage-informed craft," said our review, "immaculately presented in a used but not abused fashion; [a] superb 'old Gibson' feel and far-reaching hotpot of vintage sounds – a modern classic in the making."

Price: ***£4,495*** ***Website:*** ***www.ivisonguitars.com***

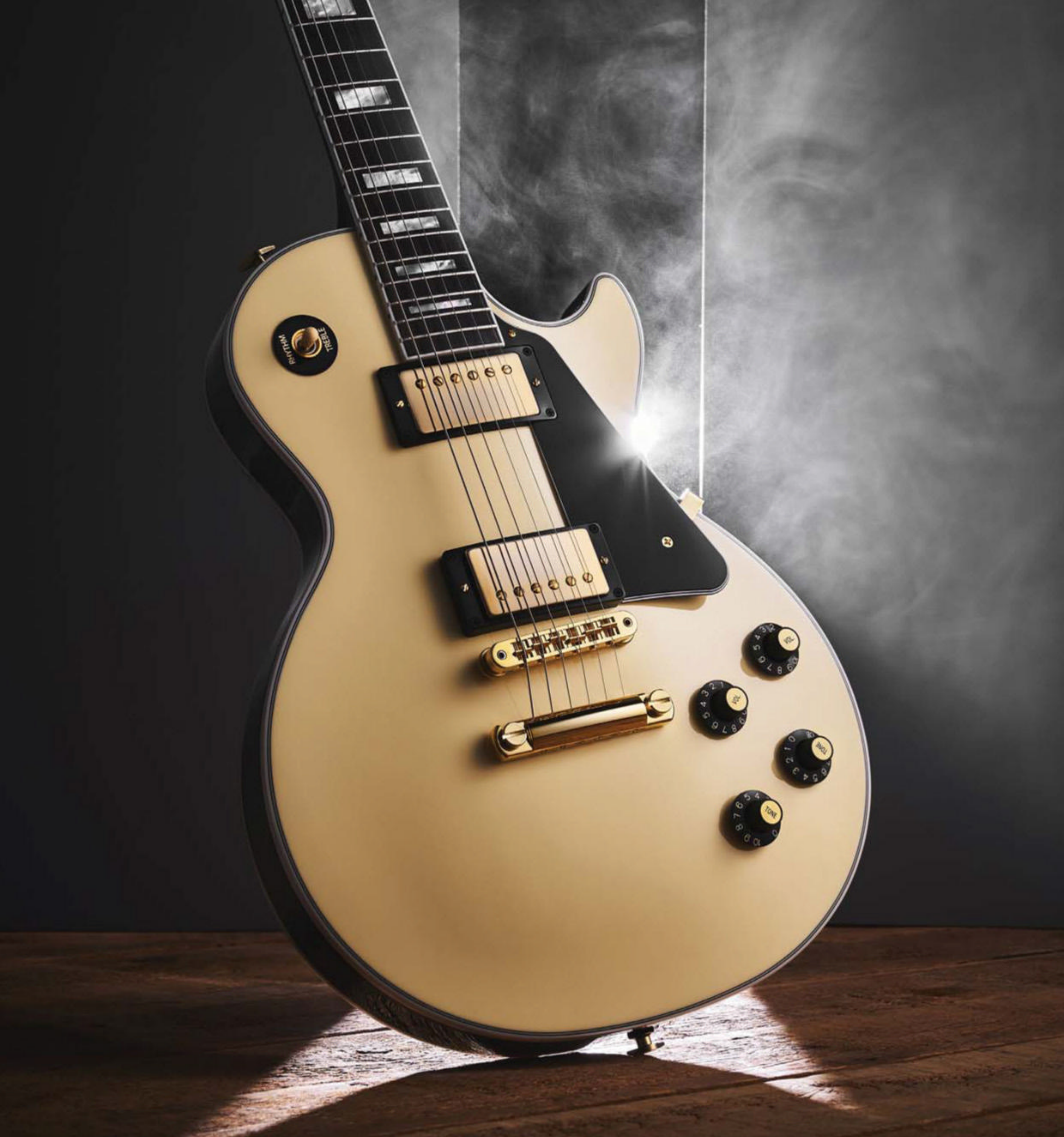
MY YEAR IN GEAR

ACTIVE STRATS *by Richard Barrett*

"Though many vintage purists may disagree, for a touring/working guitar, I feel that consistency and reliability are more important than vintage character and quirks. Playing larger venues with extensive outboard gear, lighting rigs, induction loops, and so on, can be problematic for vintage-spec single coils. And unless you're David Gilmour, chances are people will look to you to solve any problems quickly and not disrupt the soundcheck.

"Knowing that Mr Gilmour had (for several years, at least) solved his noise issues by using EMG active pickups, I was very interested to try his signature set. The plus points are: no noise, no need to earth to the strings (regrettably, this has also been an issue with some of the more far-flung places), a variable mid boost and hardly any string pull aka 'Strat-itis'. Tonally, they're quite rich and full, too, depending how high you set them. Definitely not the characterless mega-high-output monsters some would have you believe – and well worth a try if you identify with any of these issues."

PHOTO BY RICHARD BARRETT



Gibson Les Paul Custom 70s

For the first time in a couple of decades, the Custom finally rejoined the USA production line-up earlier this year. But this is no repro of the original 1954-spec model: as the name tells you, it's loosely based on the 70s era when plenty of the classic recipes changed.

Today's Custom is also a different beast from the current Standard 50s or 60s models. The big change is the one-piece maple neck with protruding volute, the fingerboard switches to ebony, the top is three-piece plain maple, and the back is mahogany with no weight relief. It's topped off with lashings of multi-layered purfling within the copious binding, and the big headstock's 'split diamond' inlay and bright mother-of-pearl block inlays. The neck profile sits between the clubbier 50s and slimmer 60s SlimTaper, a classic full C that's more of a handful as you move up the neck. Gibson's frets aren't the tallest, but examples we evaluated played very well and, powered with lower-output T-Top-style T-Type 'buckers, you're in for a classic ride that takes in clean BB King-like smooth snap, Santana's sustain-for-days classic tone and big Steve Jones forceful drive.

Yes, our samples were heavy and it's quite an uplift, price-wise, over the Standard, "but it sounds glorious," we concluded – and is a reminder of why many of us got into this lark back in the day.

Price: ***£3,499*** *Website:* ***www.gibson.com***

ACOUSTIC GUITARS

These superior builds provide the perfect vehicle for strumming, fingerstyle and beyond

Words: ***David Mead***

Furch Pioneer-ER a

High-quality workmanship combined with a supreme level of innovation always seem to go hand in hand with guitars we've seen from Furch's Czech Republic-based workshop. The company's Pioneer model is a sibling to its Little Jane travel guitar with its detachable, fold-away neck that returns to pitch on reassembly. Here, Furch addresses another plague of the weary wayfarer: changes to humidity levels. The Pioneer counters this by a cunning device in the neck joint that automatically sets the action depending on the prevailing climate. Furthermore, a side port ensures this mini-marvel comes equipped with a strident sound that belies its diminutive dimensions.

Price: ***€1,149*** *Website:* ***https://furchguitars.com***

Gibson Acoustic Hummingbird Studio EC

Of all the guitars in Gibson's rich heritage, the Hummingbird stands head and shoulders with the J-45 as one of its most instantly recognisable and highly desirable acoustic guitars. Seen in the hands of artists from right across the spectrum of musical styles, it's a guitar that's well known for its full-bodied power and rich, sweet sonority. This Studio version represents a stripped-down, no-frills edition of Gibson's famous 'Bird, but whereas the price might be just over half of the standard fully loaded version, there is no skimping here when it comes to tone and playability. That distinctive Gibson acoustic tone in an affordable yet tone-rich package? We're definitely in!

Price: ***£2,599*** *Website:* ***www.gibson.com***

Bourgeois Slope D Standard T/S

This instrument is the result of an extraordinary alliance between Dana Bourgeois, one of the world's foremost luthiers, and the China-based Eastman workshops, and is known as the Touchstone series. Dana's team in Maine, USA, makes, braces and voices the guitars' tops, which are then shipped to Beijing where the rest of the guitar is assembled in accordance with Bourgeois' own strict guidelines. Obviously, this keeps manufacturing costs down and the result is instruments that bear a boutique marque at a fraction of the price. The build quality is superb and, in the case of this slope-shouldered dread, the sound is quite simply amazing. Remarkable value for money.

Price: ***£2,899*** *Website:* ***https://bourgeoisguitars.com***

I LEARNED FROM THAT

SIMPLICITY & COMFORT *by Neville Marten*

"I recently stood in on a friend's charity gig and took my two-tone sunburst Strat and Mesa/Boogie Mark I Reissue combo, plus a small array of quality effects, including overdrive, distortion, a multi-tap delay unit, a combination reverb/tremolo, a chorus and, of course, tuner. However, during soundcheck it quickly became apparent that several of these pedals were too complicated for me to set up on the fly, and the lettering too tiny to read under stage lighting. So, sadly, it's soon goodbye to these and hello to a few simpler, more legible products.

"The band itself was a revolving array of musicians that included brass and woodwind section, the usual keys, two guitars, bass, and various vocalists and guest players. No dress code was sent out beforehand, but checking out the other players' footwear I noticed that, while I was wearing uncompromisingly stiff leather boots, as most of them would've done a decade or two ago, the others had gone for squishy black Skechers. Outlet centre, here I come!"

BROADCAST
FLINT
OCD

PHOTO BY NEVILLE MARTEN

JWJ Orchestra Select

We first ran across JWJ Guitars a few years ago when luthier Rich Jones came down to the *Guitarist* studios to display his wares. We were struck immediately by the quality of workmanship on show and that has been a factor in every guitar hailing from the Shrewsbury-based workshop ever since. Rich is essentially a one-man-band builder and so every stage of a JWJ guitar's construction is done by hand using premium tonewoods such as Honduras mahogany, high-grade redwood, cedar and spruce, and the nitrocellulose finishes are all hand-sprayed. This sort of boutique-level detail would normally imply a price tag to match, but we have been constantly amazed at how reasonably priced the instruments in the catalogue actually are. Then there's the sound. Every JWJ we've reviewed has one major characteristic in common: the sheer musicality of the tones they produce.

This Orchestra Model from the Select Series is no exception as it's absolutely sizzling with quality and great sounds. Made from the prized formula of Adirondack spruce and Honduran mahogany and all safely tucked away in a Gator hard bag, the OM proved to be practically unbeatable in our year-long overview of acoustic guitars.

***Price:* £2,145 *Website:* https://jwjguitars.co.uk**

HAPPY SHOPPER?

The 2025 closure of PMT and GAK has sounded alarm bells for the guitar trade. But industry giant Lee Anderton tells us it's "not all doom and gloom"

"I don't for any minute think that the music industry had an easy ride after Covid. There was a huge boom for those who were able to trade online while the shops were closed. But then we had a real slump where there were oversupply issues and probably a false sense of what the demand was likely to be post-pandemic.

"But I don't fundamentally put that down as the reason why we lost a couple of the bigger retailers this year. I think you have to lay the majority of that at the door of consumer shopping habits changing, and retailers not responding to those changes. I feel like that is ultimately the reason any retailer fails in the end.

"You know, feeling like you were a successful retailer 10 years ago does not mean you can just repeat that model over and over *ad infinitum* and guarantee continued success. Consumer shopping habits now are: they want more choice, faster delivery, better service, more information. And I think, fundamentally, more choice and faster delivery were the two things that smaller retailers and multi-site retailers have struggled to deliver. Because if you take a big American brand that might have 1,000 SKUs in the catalogue – and I'm not even going into the accessories, I'm just talking guitars, amps and pedals – consumers can tap onto a website and find any one of those 1,000 guitars in a five-minute session.

"They'll choose which one they want. And if the next step is to go to their local retailer and say, 'I've found this guitar, I'm interested', and that retailer goes, 'Sorry, we haven't got that' – which is absolutely what will happen, nine times out of 10, in a small retailer – then the consumer will say, 'Don't worry about it, I'll get it somewhere else.'

"In fact, the one thing that's making it very hard in the industry – at whatever level – is that there's just too much choice. The customer has such overwhelming choice that it's very hard to make sure you've got the thing they want. And it's greed economics: the big brands demand growth every year, and the only way they get growth is to go, 'Oh, well, we're famous for making this particular model, but that's not enough any more, so we need something that looks a bit pointy or jazzy or whatever.'

"Everybody is trying to make everything. And the reality is that we're all doomed to failure then because there's just not enough customers to buy everything that every brand makes. I wish it would go back to when brands were brilliant at doing one thing and just do that. But that's fantasy economics. You know, big American corporations and investors want growth – and growth will come at a cost, ultimately.

> *"The customer has such overwhelming choice now that it's very hard to make sure you've got the thing they want"*

"If I was a small-to-medium-sized retailer now, I would be making sure that my catalogue offering was all deliverable within 24 hours. And as a consequence, I would just think, 'I'm not going to be a retailer for a big American manufacturer because I'm just going to be telling my customers 90 per cent of the time that I haven't got what they want.' I'd decide that I'm going to become hyper-niche, and maybe do secondhand or vintage or esoteric brands really well, and I'll accept that, actually, I won't appeal to most guitar players. But at least I'll be good at that one thing I've decided to do – as opposed to bad at a lot of things.

"From what I'm hearing, the business out there is not as bad as people perceive. I'm seeing what I think is a lot of largely misleading press, like, 'The problem is that no-one wants to buy guitars any more, no-one wants to play music any more.' But what I'm hearing from most of my suppliers is that the business in 2025 isn't that different from 2024. By the way, this is off the back of Andertons having its best year ever. So I don't think there is this massive doom and gloom story out there for the music industry; I just think it's changing habits and changing expectations. And some brands are doing a good job of adjusting their offering to appeal to those customers – and some brands aren't." ■

HSS
£659
SQUIER
VINTAGE MODIFIED
£269-
£269
£399

The landscape of bricks-and-mortar guitar stores has undoubtedly changed in recent years, but they still have a very valid place

PHOTO BY JESSE WILD

YOUR SOUND - CENTRE STAGE

Helix Stadium XL Floor delivers authentic Agoura™ powered tone, expressive feel, and a modern workflow that puts creative control at your feet, from shaping signature sounds to managing complex stage setups with confidence and precision effortlessly.

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Retro Reel
Vital Boost
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Stereo Imager
Maximum Hype

FIND OUT MORE
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AMPLIFIERS

Valves continue to deliver delectable tone in this line-up of world-class heads and combos

Words: ***Martin Smith***

Blackstar DA100 Ruby

Together with ex-Whitesnake guitarist Doug Aldrich, Blackstar has tweaked its existing HT Stage 100 into a three-channel, crimson-clad behemoth with multiple voices, speaker emulating IR outputs and digital programmability. Glassy Fender-like tones can be swapped for AC30-style crunch in its Clean channel, while the overdrive gain ranges from 'edge of break-up' through to classic-rock chunk, arriving at 80s modified Marshall tones. The OD Voice controls scoop the boxier mids away together with a gain boost. Impressive reverb, solo boost, fully featured foot controller and computer-integrated programmability, plus a modest price tag, make this is a must-try amp.

Price: ***£1,249*** *Website:* ***https://blackstaramps.com***

Vox AC15X Hand-Wired

Vox takes us back to the sound of its illustrious golden era with this hand-wired member of the AC family. Reverse engineered to achieve the tones of the Vox glory years, this model sees many improvements, including a redesigned transformer, more resonant cabinet material and a new high-quality spring reverb unit. The sonic payback comes in the form of increased chime and touch sensitivity, beautiful note bloom and glorious harmonic feedback at louder volumes. The AC Hand-Wired range, with models in an array of wattages, has every bit of that legendary sound readily awaiting you, for a playing experience that will surely have you grinning ear to ear.

Price: ***£2,199*** *Website:****www.voxamps.co.uk***

Bad Cat Era 30

A lifetime of design excellence culminates in this, the final amp from designer Mark Sampson for Bad Cat: a beautifully built 30-watt AC-style head, with a point-to-point hand-wired circuit. The two channels each represent a different period of the Vox history, with a vintage-voiced EF86-based Channel 1 and a 12AX7-based Channel 2. The new Blend switch may be the Era 30's most exciting feature, combining both channels in-phase for a stunning range of tonal variations. While this dynamic amp covers a range from clean to classic rock-style gain, many players will seek out the Era 30 for its 'edge of break-up' tones alone – and will certainly not be disappointed.

Price: ***£2,299*** *Website:* ***https://badcatamps.com***

MOD SQUAD

BANISHING BENT BRIDGES *by Huw Price*

"Deformed bridges often blight old Gibsons. The cheap alloy Gibson used was great for tone, but most bridges eventually sag under string pressure. String radius becomes flatter than the 'board radius and that compromises tones and playability. Inspired by various Instagram posts, I decided to make my own straightening jig using an offcut from a hard maple flooring plank, a couple of steel rods to hold everything square, and a small piece of leather to protect the metal plating.

"Attempting to straighten bridges risks snapping them, but a friend gave me a bag of saggy ABR-1s and absolution in advance. I loaded a bridge into the jig, placed it in my vice and slowly tightened it while listening for alarming noises. Nothing untoward happened, and when I unloaded the bridge it was perfectly flat. Within minutes I'd fixed all of the bridges. No doubt one will snap or crack eventually, but 40 or so bridges later, my luck is still holding. The jig itself was cheap, easy to make and is something you could try at home."

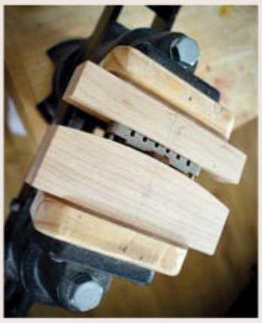


PHOTO BY HUW PRICE

Fender Blues Junior IV 30th Anniversary

The ubiquitous travel companion for rehearsal, studio or gig has received a plethora of cosmetic and sonic enhancements to mark its 30th anniversary. From its tooled-leather, western-styled vinyl and comfy padded, stitched handle to its chrome control plate, it pops with eye appeal. Not just a pretty face, however, the improvements continue under the hood of this 15-watt 1x12 stalwart.

The circuit has been refined to yield a richer midrange response, together with a sweeter top-end. For fans of the classic Fender reverb, an upgraded spring reverb tank brings forth a more authentic sound while its position in the circuit has been relocated to bring the background noise down considerably. Historically, various speakers have been deployed in numerous iterations of the Blues Junior, but to achieve the design brief of a smoother response, a Celestion A-type Creamback has been chosen; this is a popular choice from the classic British speaker manufacturer for a warmer tone. The Fat switch and Boost footswitch pump up the midrange gain and volume respectively for solo flights, now made all the more inspiring with the extra-flattering frequency response. The 30-year-old Blues Junior has matured into its best incarnation yet.

Price: ***£959*** *Website:* ***www.fender.com***

FLOOR AMPS & MULTI-EFFECTS

This year's new tech puts a world of effects at your feet

Words: ***Trevor Curwen***

TAP TREMOLO
PLETHORA X1
TONEPRINT LOADER
TRUE BYPASS
tc electronic

TC Electronic Plethora X1

The Plethora X1 is an extremely pedalboard-friendly 'chameleon' – a single pedal that can be anything that you want. The whole premise here is that you may want, say, a flanger, chorus or phaser at some point in your set but don't really want a dedicated pedal for each of those effects on your pedalboard. The X1 can provide those and more, albeit one at a time. What makes the pedal so versatile is that it's a TonePrint Loader that can house any of the sounds you'll find in TC's TonePrint pedals, which include the Hall Of Fame reverb, Flashback delay and many more. Access to all of those makes it a compact powerhouse for any 'board.

Price: ***£120*** *Website:* ***www.tcelectronic.com***

FRACTAL AUDIO SYSTEMS
A1: Virtual Pedalboard
S1: 4 Classic FX
DRV
CHO
DLY
REV
VP4
HOME
SAVE
PAGE
ENTER
EXIT
SELECT
1
2
3
4

Fractal Audio VP4

Fractal Audio provides high-end amp, cab and effects modelling products, notably the Axe-FX III flagship and FM9 and FM3 floor processors. But if you don't need the modelling, this effects-only virtual pedalboard can be used with your own amp or modeller. It has four footswitches and provides four simultaneous effects chosen from the 400 onboard. Each of the 104 onboard presets holds four chosen effects with flexible footswitching access. You get an excellent array of quality effects and impressive flexibility, all wrapped up in a bulletproof, sensibly sized unit, meaning the VP4 could be your sole pedalboard or employed as a complement to your existing stompboxes.

Price: ***£700*** *Website:* ***www.fractalaudio.com***

MIX
GRAIN
DELAY
CHORUS
TONE
TIME
RATE
SPACE
PLAYBACK
FEEDBACK
DEPTH
QI ETHEREALIZER
BYPASS
PRESET
FREEZE
TAP/OSC

Walrus Audio Qi Etherealizer

A collaboration between Walrus Audio and guitarist Yvette Young, this multi-effects pedal is pitched as a "creative playground for atmospheric exploration". Its four effects – chorus, delay, grain sampler and reverb – interact with each other in either a serial or parallel configuration and its multi-tasking footswitches provide a range of performance options. It can supply an almost limitless palette of otherworldly textural, atmospheric and ambient sounds if that's your thing, but it could also be a flexible pedalboard asset for delivering conventional single or combined chorus/vibrato, delay and reverb effects, and the occasional composite fairy dust if the need arises.

Price: ***£449*** *Website:* ***www.walrusaudio.com***

MY YEAR IN GEAR

IN WITH THE NEW *by Martin Smith*

"2025 began with delivery of a custom-built 'brown'-sounding amplifier: The One by Marshmello, created for me by Ossie Ahsen of 3 Monkeys Amps. Combining a dead-on '68 'Plexi' replica with a built-in Variac and a specially wired transformer, it wasn't cheap, but it's as close to the grail-tone as I've heard.

"I often play theatre gigs with various acts and have witnessed a rapid shift to silent stages (as far as backline goes) and in-ear monitors. I decided to look into a pedalboard-based amp solution and, after way too many hours of research, took the plunge with an AmpliTube Tonex pedal. I've taken to it like a duck to water: I've captured profiles of my rigs and even programmed my Carl Martin OctaSwitch 'The Strip' to switch between tone profiles, MIDI effects and pedal loops. I've never had such flexibility.

"While I'm straining under the weight of equipment, there's one further piece of must-have gear: a magic box to make silent stages as much fun as loud stages with real, air-moving amps. Take my money already."

PHOTO BY MARTIN SMITH

Boss GX-10 Guitar Effects Processor

A Boss guitar effects processor in a more compact format, the GX-10 is effectively a more affordable cut-down version of the GX-100. It has fewer footswitches and loses some of the socketry of its bigger sibling but features the same sound engine and touchscreen.

Designed to undertake a multitude of tasks, it will function like a standard pedalboard in front of your amp to provide a massive range of effects, or can be connected direct to a PA or FRFR if you wish to make full use of the onboard amp and cab sims. That whole fully processed effects/amp/cab sound can also be used for silent practice through the headphone socket or for recording sessions using the unit's capability as a 2-in/2-out USB audio interface.

There are more than enough user memories onboard and flexible options via the three footswitches to access the sounds, which include 23 guitar amps and 170 effects across all genres, many of them modelled recreations of classic Boss pedals. Practical performance options are also available via the treadle and footswitch parameter assignments. Whether used on its own or as a component on a standard pedalboard, the GX-10 provides access to a load of Boss sounds for a reasonably affordable outlay.

Price: ***£339*** *Website:* ***www.boss.info***

VALUE MATTERS

With so much choice and range in price, is it getting harder to know the true worth of a potential purchase?

Words: ***Dave Burrluck***

A common theme among guitar-watchers is the ever-increasing price of any new guitar. Company X launches a new range, or a new model, and we take a look at a picture on our phones, read through a basic specification and conclude, "It's too expensive! I'm not buying that. If it was cheaper, I might…" Forums can get pretty vocal, too: "We're being ripped off! How can they charge that amount of dosh?" And on it goes…

In defence of the manufacturers however, plenty have spoken to us about post-pandemic price increases on raw materials, such as woods, as well as what you would think would be more simple shipping costs. Some larger companies have absorbed many of these increases for the fear that they might price themselves out of their own market. Plenty of others simply have no choice but to raise their prices.

A surprising number of conversations I have with representatives of guitar companies – usually off the record – are about price, too, from asking if I think the price is 'right' to pondering that a recent price rise might affect their sales. Whatever I respond, unless I've seen and more importantly played the guitar, is based on the very thing I'm questioning: a picture and a spec sheet. Does the feature set look about right for a guitar made in wherever? Erm…

We'd all like *everything* to be cheaper, be it our weekly food shop, beer, petrol and so on. But guitars aren't just commodities, they're musical instruments to fuel our passion, our hobby, and perhaps even a tool to help pay those rising bills.

Personally, over many years of evaluating instruments, I've always found 'value for money' a hard thing to quantify and fought to update our review rating system. Price alone doesn't mean a cheap-as-chips guitar is better value for money than a Custom Shop dream. You might play the former a few times and it does the job but doesn't really inspire you, while the latter becomes your tool of choice for years and years. Which is the better value?

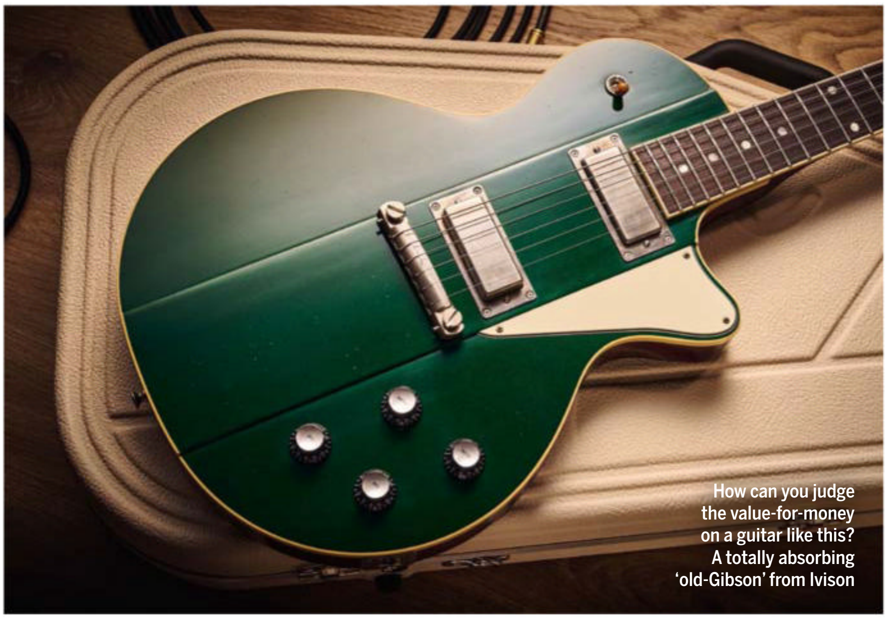
But we can't look into a crystal ball when we first engage with an instrument, of course. As we discuss elsewhere, with conventional retail changing by the day, being able to try a number of guitars is becoming quite convoluted. Resale value is another consideration that might make you think Guitar A is better value for money compared with Guitar B, if A is a big-name desirable brand and B is a much lesser-known name of equal quality. Fair enough, but is that really the main reason *not* to buy a stonkingly good guitar? And if resale value is important, then, of course, it's bundled in with condition: don't play the guitar and you'll get more when you come to sell it!

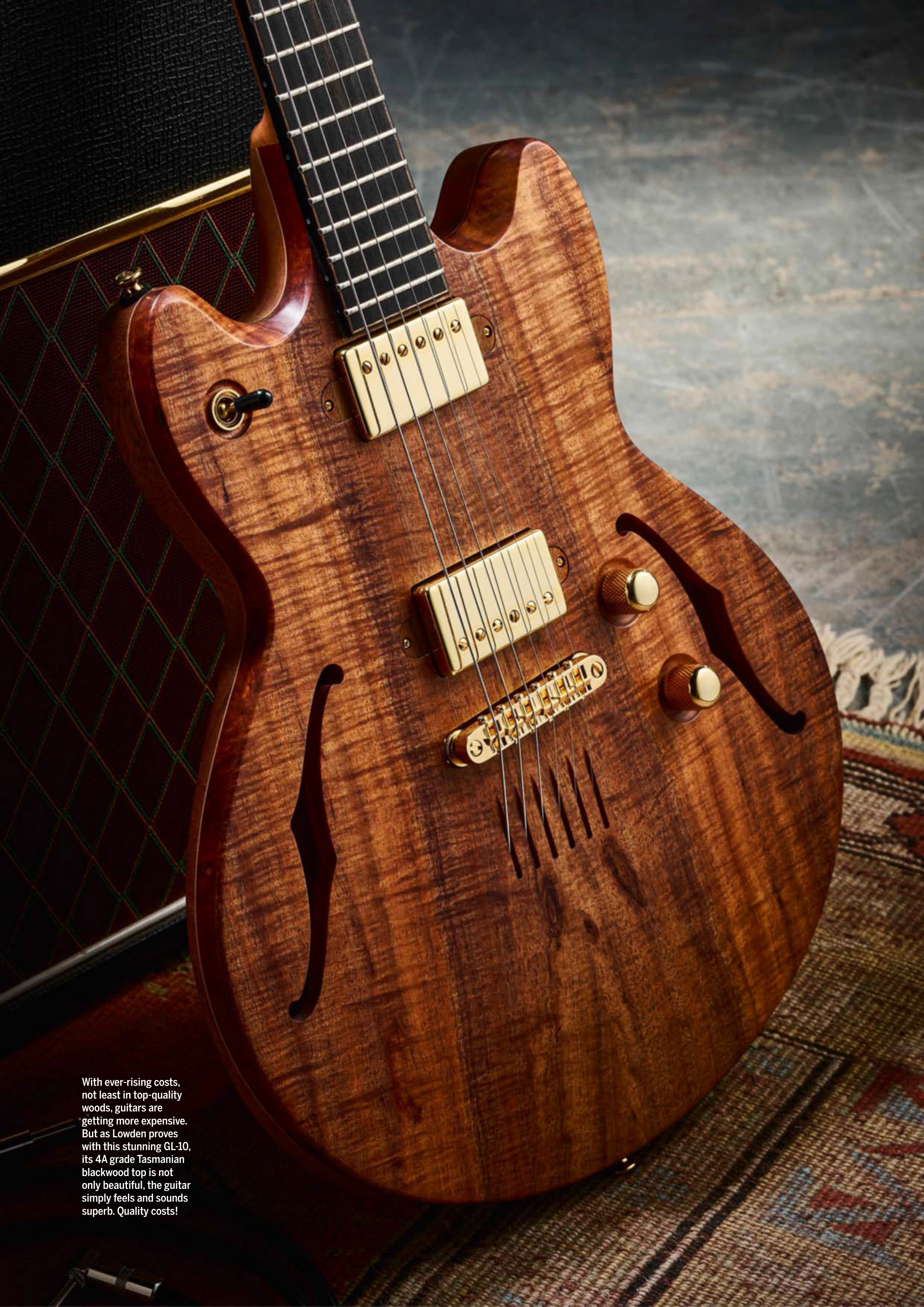
More worryingly, this adhesion to the big names means many of us simply won't even look at the increasing number of small-'shop guitar makers. Three of the winners in the highest-tier Prestige Guitars category (see page 60) are UK builds, for example – instruments that define the craft – and in speaking with each of the makers you feel a huge connection to the instrument. But plenty might conclude that their prices are ridiculous and any value rating would be low. And while these obviously aren't budget or beginner guitars, for their quality, craft and musical experience we might actually suggest they're underpriced.

Back in the mainstream world, another trend that makes the expense/value-for-money catch-all hard to nail – certainly in the context of a review – is that we seem to be seeing more instruments that, on launch, cost £999, let's say. Three months later, that's dropped to £799 and six months to a year on it's reduced even further. It's the same guitar: maybe it's been overstocked, maybe it hasn't engaged with the guitar-buying public. Too many guitars with too little shelf life? Whatever, if unrealistic or certainly optimistic pricing continues, many looking to increase their purchase value for money will simply hold fire, won't they?

> *"Guitars aren't just commodities, they fuel our passion, our hobby, and are perhaps even a tool to help pay those rising bills"*

Will your world end if you pay a little more for something that *you* really enjoy and use to make music with, whether that's a bit of home noodling or a pro-level tour? Surely, that's the best gauge of value for money. As we've often said, the 'best' guitar is simply the one that suits you, regardless of what your mates or the internet think. Maybe it's time to reconsider?


How can you judge the value-for-money on a guitar like this? A totally absorbing 'old-Gibson' from Ivison



With ever-rising costs, not least in top-quality woods, guitars are getting more expensive. But as Lowden proves with this stunning GL-10, its 4A grade Tasmanian blackwood top is not only beautiful, the guitar simply feels and sounds superb. Quality costs!

DRIVE EFFECTS

Modern evolutions of classic gear dish the dirt this year

Words: ***Trevor Curwen***

Crazy Tube Circuits Venus

Used by David Gilmour and Billy Gibbons to name just two, the BK Butler/Chandler Tube Driver was never particularly pedalboard-friendly with its large footprint and AC power. But the Crazy Tube Circuits' Venus puts Tube Driver voicings and features into a more compact pedal with improved practicality, not least its standard nine-volt operation. Use the included ECC832 valve or put in one of your own choice, find its sweet spot with the Bias knob and explore the pedal's range, from just beyond clean to really creamy full-on drive, dripping with sustain and cleaning up nicely with guitar volume. An inspired, accessible take on a classic, relevant for the modern pedalboard.

Price: ***£235*** *Website:* ***www.crazytubecircuits.com***

J Rockett Blue Note Select

The latest incarnation of J Rockett's drive pedal gets a complete makeover in both looks and circuitry here in the Blue Note Select. This low-to-medium gain drive pedal has toggle-switched Standard and Fat modes, and while it won't radically alter your core tone, the magic is in the enhancement it offers with the Tone knob, tweaking the crucial top-end frequencies, while a Fat knob pushes lower midrange to thicken your sound. This excellent drive pedal is a natural extension of the amp, giving you that little more when you need it. It could find its best use as the sole dirt pedal in front of an amp that's starting to cook or as a vital component in multiple-pedal gain staging.

Price: ***£239*** *Website:* ***www.rockettpedals.com***

ThorpyFX Hanami Germanium Fuzz

Thorpy's first pedal without a military theme, the Hanami Germanium Fuzz pedal is designed as a natural successor to the Tone Bender-based Boneyard pedal and sits somewhere between that and the Big-Muff inspired Fallout Cloud. While the lineage of those two is apparent in the new pedal, it is very much its own thing and has a great set of attributes that provide a practicality upgrade over vintage pedals. A transformer-isolated input gives the low-noise pedal the flexibility to be placed wherever you want it in the signal chain, while interactive Treble and Bass controls tailor the sound to your exact needs, delivering fat, smooth and richly textured fuzz that can attain a fierce edge.

Price: ***£329*** *Website:* ***www.thorpyfx.com***

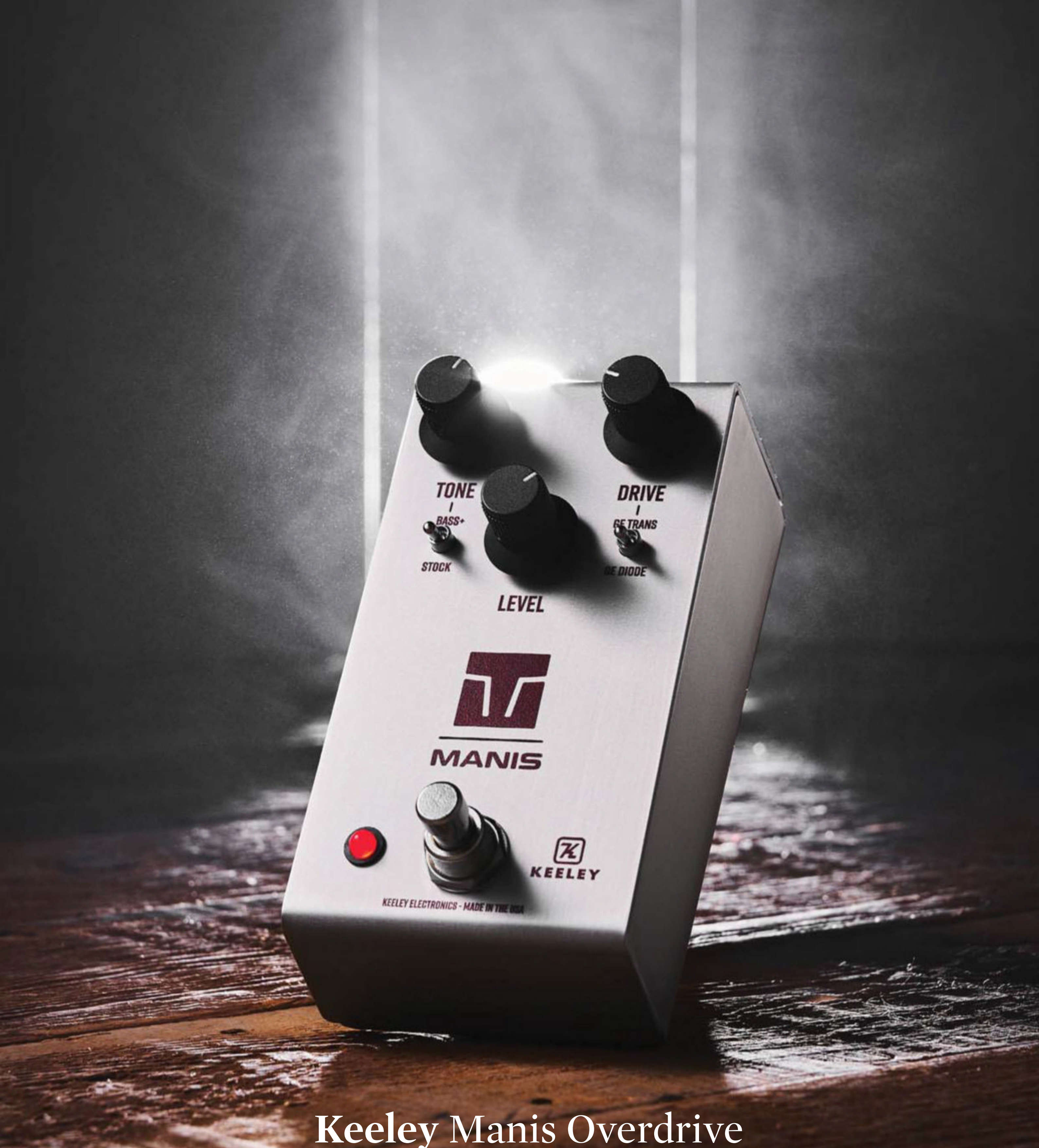
I LEARNED FROM THAT

ROSEWOOD RULES *by Trevor Curwen*

"This year, I was reminded of the fact that while you might think you know guitars, there's always something waiting to surprise you. Here's a case in point. Trawling Reverb.com, I saw a Fender Limited Edition I never knew existed: a 2018 Telecaster Deluxe. Now, I'd always liked the idea of a Telecaster Deluxe with its twin humbuckers, but, call me fickle, I hated that Fender gave it a huge Strat headstock – that's just plain wrong! This one, though, had a proper narrow Telecaster headstock, so I had to have it... The only thing was it had a solid one-piece rosewood neck, a bit of an unknown quantity.

PHOTO BY TREVOR CURWEN

"The guitar arrived and what a revelation. That satin-finish solid rosewood neck felt great in the hands, more so than any of my others (and I have a shedload of guitars). With my left hand now moving with a graceful ease I hadn't known before, I didn't want to put the guitar down. Why had I never played an all-rosewood neck before?"



Keeley Manis Overdrive

The Klon Centaur established itself as an icon of guitar tone during the 90s, making it inevitable that variations on the theme have been coming in thick and fast from many different pedal companies over the years. The aim, in the first instance, must be to match the original sound, but the most interesting 'Klones' are evolved versions that take the original premise and run with it, increasing versatility by adding new features. Enter the Keeley Manis Overdrive, which does exactly that with an inspired option of using transistors as an alternative to the stock clipping diodes.

The versatility of the Manis comes via two two-way toggle switches for a total of four sonic combinations. One switches between the germanium diodes and transistors, while the other brings in a bass boost with an extra 3dB of low-end girth. Both switches down (diodes and no extra bass) perfectly nails the sound of an original Klon, while switching to transistor mode delivers more of a valve-like feel as those driven tones become more saturated and compressed. This pedal boasts plenty of adaptability to various amp and guitar combinations, putting traditional Klon tone, plus a squashier, gainier drive in a 'board-friendly package.

Price: ***£209*** *Website:* ***www.robertkeeley.com***

DELAY & MODULATION EFFECTS

Electro-mechanicals revisited, analogue modulation refined and esoteric ambiences combined

Words: ***Trevor Curwen***

Rotary Ensemble
RT-2
SPEED
BOSS

Boss RT-2 Rotary Ensemble

The Boss compact pedal range has been one of the most comprehensive ever in its almost 50-year history, but somewhat surprisingly there's never been a rotary speaker effect in that format – until the RT-2 arrived a few months ago. Based on a full-size Leslie 122 cabinet with rotating horn and drum, the pedal has three differently voiced modes of operation selected by a toggle switch. Two are variations on the classic sound, while the third takes things into different territory with what is effectively an evolved version of rotary sound. With adjustable drive and speed change via a long footswitch press, here's flexible rotary sound in a form that should suit any pedalboard.

Price: ***£229*** *Website:* ***www.boss.info***

TIME
REC LEVEL
MIX
TAPE AGE
REPEATS
MECHANICS
EC-1
single head dTape echo
hold (tap)
strymon

Strymon EC-1 Single Head Tape Echo

The EC-1 is a digitally modelled emulation of an Echoplex single-head tape echo in a nicely compact enclosure. Strymon has put the best aspects of various vintage Echoplex models into a single pedal, while also taking it beyond the capabilities of an original mono unit by adding a stereo option. The delay range is expanded and you'll find a whole range of practical tone-shaping capability built in. Whether you use it for echo, its preamp sound or both, this pedal delivers loads of subtle variation on a sound that has a real connection to the past but also makes it more compatible with modern rigs, offering a perfect melding of vintage sound with modern practicality.

Price: ***£270*** *Website:* ***www.strymon.net***

DELAY
MIX
FEEDBACK
TONE
CONTROL 1
CONTROL 2
ENCOUNTER
DELAY/TAP
REVERB
SOURCE AUDIO

Source Audio Encounter

This 'Ambient Delay+Reverb' features two footswitches that effectively give you two separate pedals for use individually or together, each of which can be loaded with one of six delay and six reverb engines slanted towards the esoteric. However, while there's a whole spectrum of ethereal atmospheric soundscapes to be conjured up, there's also editing flexibility courtesy of the USB-connected Neuro 3 app, which can dial in more traditional delays and reverbs for conventional guitar usage. This endows the Encounter with wide-ranging functionality as a practical delay/reverb unit that may well be the only one you need on your 'board, with presets ready to be called up as required.

Price: ***£369*** *Website:* ***www.sourceaudio.net***

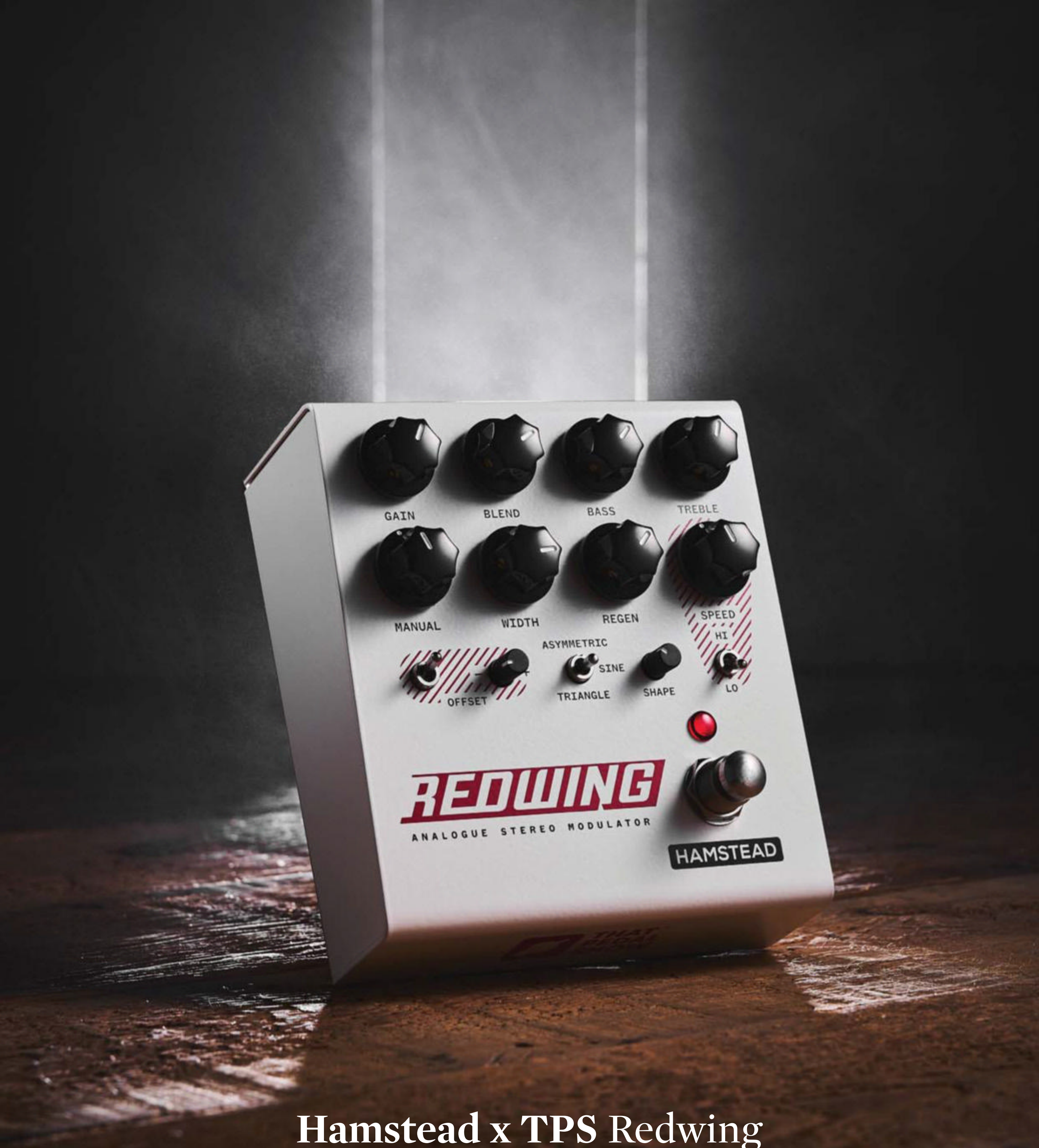
MOD SQUAD

PICKUP HEIGHT DILEMMA *by Neville Marten*

"In my earliest electric guitar playing days, the only amplifiers available were non-master volume jobs. These needed pushing hard to elicit any kind of overdrive. Because of this situation I always set the treble side of single-coil pickups as high as they would go. As a very light player, I liked the more aggressive tone that this gave me.

"However, during a recent *Guitarist* Stratocaster shootout, a couple of fellow participants questioned the proximity of my red Custom Shop Stratocaster's pickups to the strings. Some of their Strats' pickups were way lower than I'd ever have mine. But, of course, these days our amps have plenty of gain, and distortion and overdrive pedals proliferate. I've always known that my way of doing things went against the grain (although I know others that do it, too), so following that encounter I decided to reduce the height of my pickups somewhat – and guess what? The tone is a bit sweeter. So now I set my pedals with a bit more push, in order to compensate. Old dog, new tricks? It would certainly seem so."

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS



Hamstead x TPS Redwing

An all-analogue stereo modulation pedal utilising two independent BBD delay lines, the Redwing is a collaboration with Mick Taylor and Daniel Steinhardt of *That Pedal Show*, featuring an array of knobs and switches enabling instant hands-on control of all the parameters you'd need to dial up a range of classic effects.

Capable of flanging, chorus, vibrato, ring modulation and rotary speaker-style sounds, it was designed to match the tonal magic of original classic pedals like the Electro-Harmonix Electric Mistress but also to surpass them in terms of sound and functionality within a modern rig. There's no bulky form factor, non-standard power supply or lack of EQ adjustment here, nor purely mono operation, as there are also stereo connectivity choices.

In A/B tests, the Redwing proved capable of getting close to the sounds of our vintage pedals and can take things further still: nuanced control of parameters with extended ranges allow you to get more extreme if required, or you can dial in sounds that 'fall between the cracks' of other units. Performance options include expression-pedal control over modulation speed and temporary feedback oscillation via a momentary footswitch. Whether emulating the classics or building new tones, this is a hands-on modulation toolkit for your pedalboard.

Price: ***£429*** *Website:* ***www.hamsteadsoundworks.com***

MODDING & UTILITY

Top-class additions to your rig to keep you sounding your best

Words: ***Dave Burrluck, Trevor Curwen & Martin Smith***

PHOTO: TONERIDER.COM

Tonerider Apex Classic Set

We were reminded of how good Tonerider's UK-designed, Chinese-made pickups are while testing the new Eastman FullerTone guitars (see page 57). The DC '62 stacked single-coil-size humbuckers are now available aftermarket as the very well-priced Apex Classic set. This style of pickup has been around for decades and if you're bothered by single-coil noise – not least with hefty gains and proximity to mains transformers or computer screens – it's an obvious way to go. These sound very close to the real deal, but there's no noise and, to be honest, hum-cancelling or not, we really liked the way they sound and they very much suited our heavily modded 'studio' Strat.

Price: ***£140*** *Website:* ***www.tonerider.com***

PHOTO: RUOKANGAS.COM

Ruokangas Pickup Set

Not only does Ruokangas make superb hand-crafted guitars in Finland, they've now started making their own pickups: the Alnico IV VÄINÖ bridge humbucker and the Alnico II AINO neck humbucker. So what? Well, developing something called Flux-Coil Stabilisation, they've managed to create a partially potted humbucker that sounds like it's unpotted – the best of both worlds. On an old PRS CE 24 they sounded *very* balanced, low in output with clarity, lively but not microphonic. They're offered in uncovered, covered or in open-frames with 12 different face-plates, and alternate polepiece and cover/frame plating. Very special indeed.

Price: ***From €380*** *Website:* ***https://ruokangas.com***

Two Notes Torpedo Reload II

Following the release of its Captor X reactive load box, the French manufacturer set its design sights on creating a Swiss Army knife of amp connectivity, culminating in this Reload II. Attractive wooden-end cheeks frame a brushed metal chassis, evoking the look of high-end recording studio equipment. There's a packed feature set including inputs switchable for amps, modellers or preamps, a Celestion-approved reactive load, two 215-watt channels of stereo power amplification, stereo effects loop, tone-shaping controls and recording outputs, plus the excellent Genome amp modelling application. Two Notes finally allows you to turn up to 11 without ear or gear damage.

Price ***£849*** *Website:* ***www.two-notes.com***

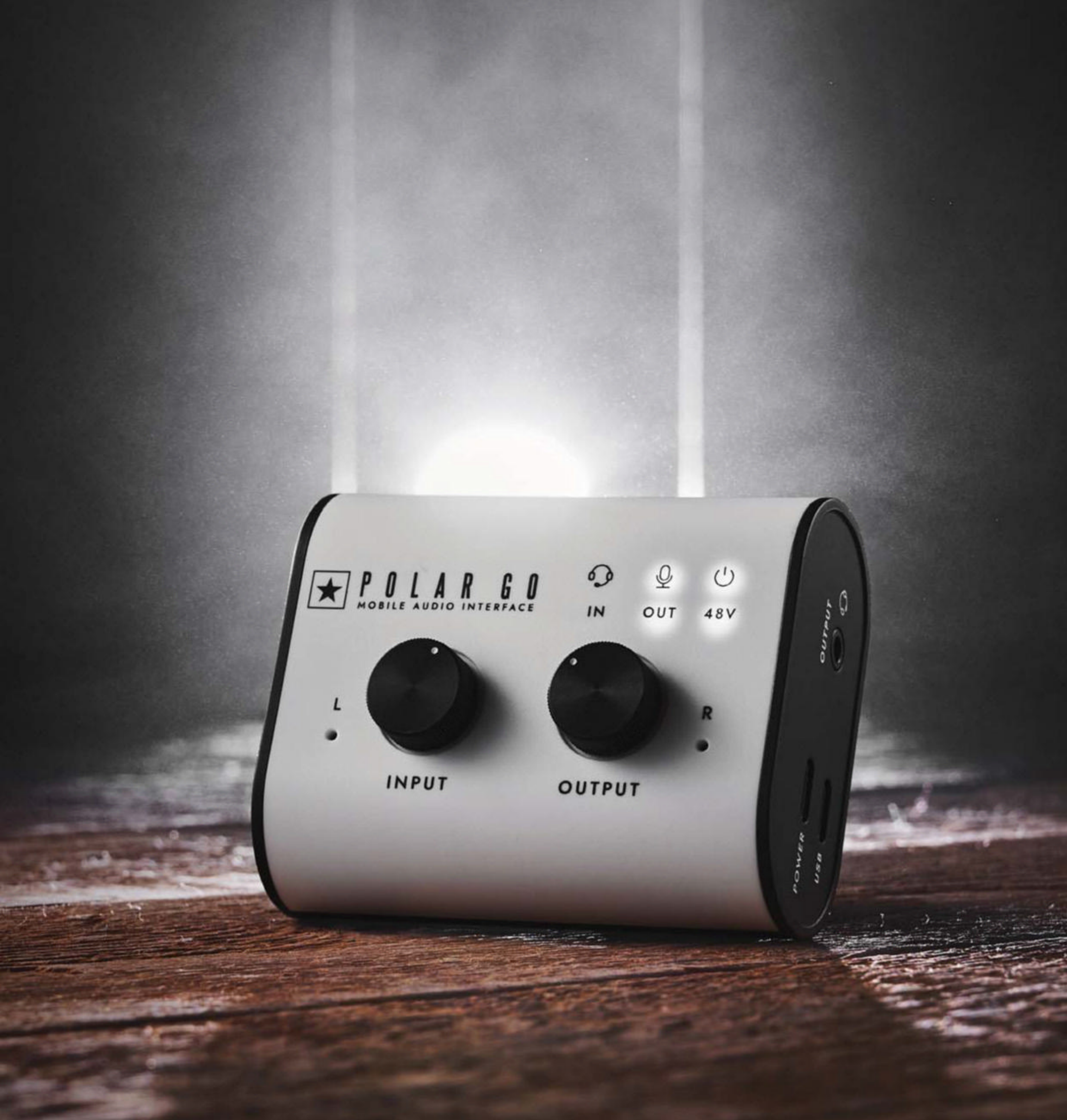
MY YEAR IN GEAR

FINDING THE ONE *by Dave Burrluck*

"Earlier this year I had the pleasure of an extended loan of an Epiphone Oxblood, which is one of our standout Les Pauls of this year (see page 58). But when that guitar needed to be shot down at *Guitarist* HQ, I went back to my 'number one' for some years now, a PJD Carey Classic, and the Oxblood went back. Every time I gig it someone comes up and asks, 'What's that guitar? It sounds great.' It just fits me.

"To that end, when PJD was planning a very limited run of the Carey Classic to celebrate its 15th anniversary a few months back, I shipped the guitar back so Leigh Dovey and Josh Parkin could evaluate the sounds and original neck shape. Leigh admitted that my Carey Classic was the first he'd ever made, and that the reason it sounds like it does was, basically, "luck". The new very limited version sold out immediately and the original is back with me and still in constant use. When you find the one, even if you weren't looking, it's very hard to go back."

PHOTO BY OLLY CURTIS

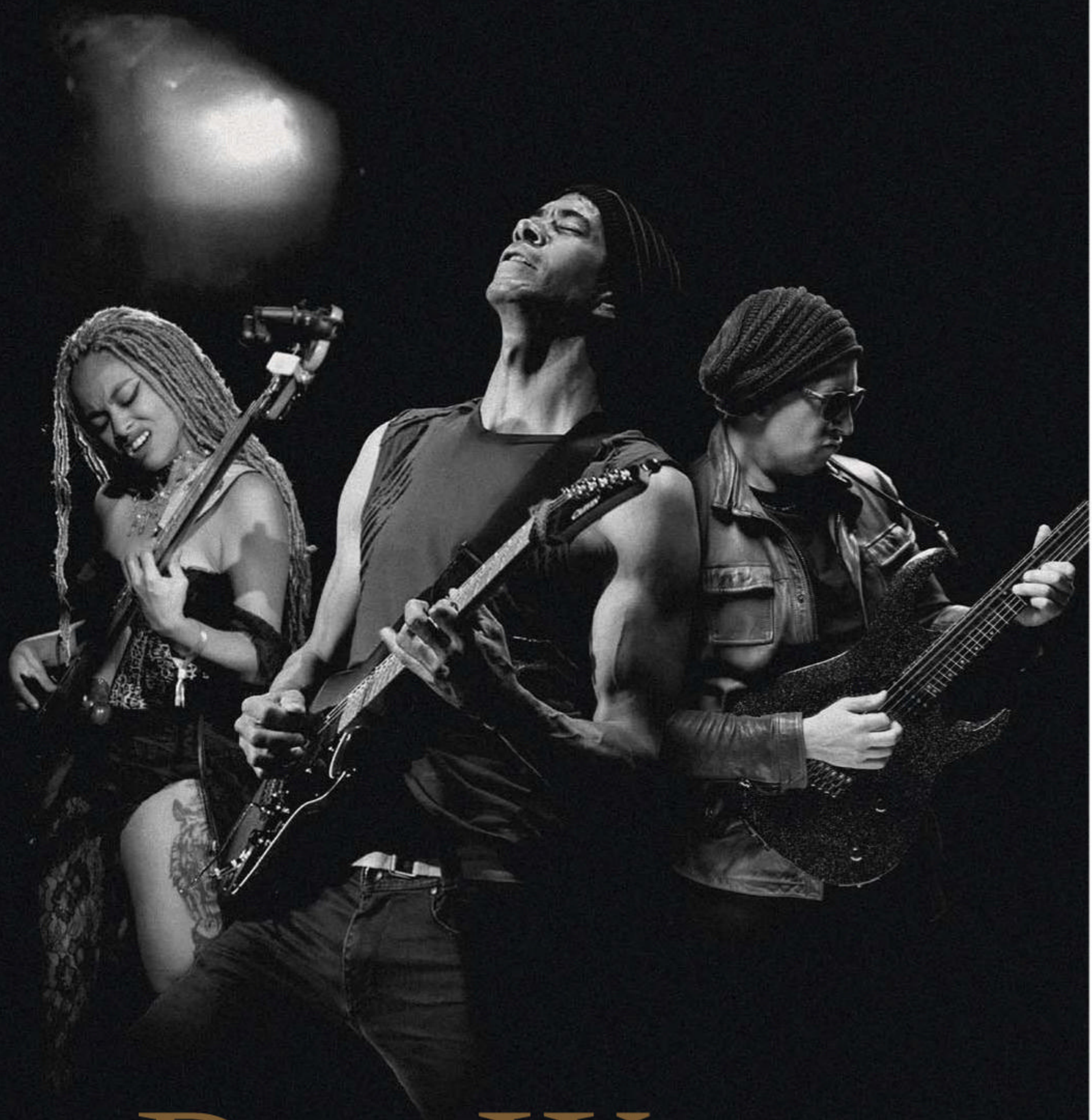


Blackstar Polar Go

The latest addition to Blackstar's range of USB audio interfaces, the Polar Go is a pocket-sized unit for recording quality audio wherever you may be, offering a distinct upgrade over built-in phone mics (see our review on page 24). Audio capture is via the unit's stereo microphones or a combi XLR/jack input for plugging in instruments, modelling devices or mics (48-volt phantom power is available). Physical Input and Output level knobs allow quick tweaks, but there's more available via connection to the Polar Go app for mobile devices and computers. There, you'll get access to the DSP engine for reverb, compression, EQ and noise control.

The Polar Go connects with audio apps in your phone, such as GarageBand and BandLab, but we see a particular use for it if you like to record guitar-playing videos for social media. Within the Polar Go app, you'll find a Camera tab that lets you control video recordings on your phone and monitor what the phone camera is 'seeing' in real-time, while the audio that's recorded via the interface is automatically sync'd to the captured video. So, if you want the videos you create of your guitar playing to be accompanied by professional-quality audio, then Blackstar's Polar Go may be exactly what your setup needs.

Price: ***£79*** *Website:* ***https://blackstaramps.com***



DarWin

Reinventing the concept album and raising the technical bar, DarWin are the prog band to beat. Guitarist Greg Howe and bassist Mohini Dey, plus the supergroup's mysterious namesake, tell us about new album, *Distorted Mirror*

Words Henry Yates

PHOTOS (L-R) @VASTISTANBUL / PHOTOFM.COM/SIMONE LOMBAR

Most supergroups are an exercise in egomania. But back in 2015, DarWin formed with the purest of intentions: to fill each position with the best musician in their discipline, set them loose on ambitious, narrative-driven material, and let the sparks fly. On drums and production, there's god-among-sessioners Simon Phillips. On vocals (breaking from his familiar role as bassist), Ringo Starr and Elton John associate, Matt Bissonette.

On rhythm guitar? Well, that's a little trickier. In an age when we're told mystique is dead in rock 'n' roll, we know next to nothing about the project's songwriter, svengali and namesake. Fortunately, while DarWin himself will only answer emailed questions about new studio album, *Distorted Mirror*, veteran guitar virtuoso Greg Howe and Mumbai-born bass sensation Mohini Dey are happy to fill the gaps.

How did you get involved with the DarWin project?

Greg Howe: "Back in 2018, I was working in LA with Simon Phillips in Protocol. One day, he said, 'There's a guy who wants you to play on his songs.' So I went down to Simon's studio and heard DarWin's stuff. He was online with us, so we'd record something, send him a quick mp3, then he'd get back with critiques. I just remember thinking, 'This is a unique sound.' And I'm always into that. As for DarWin himself, he's quite mysterious. I can't even say much more about him."

> *"I feel like these days everything is so progressive… With DarWin, we're keeping that old-school pop-rock vibe alive"* MOHINI DEY

Whereas, Mohini, you joined in 2022. What's the appeal of DarWin for you?

Mohini Dey: "I love the little elements of pop and jazz. I feel like these days everything is so progressive, we've lost that old-school pop-rock vibe, and with DarWin, we're keeping that aspect alive. People can groove and sing along, so it's more relatable than super-technically challenging. I mean, we're all capable of that, but this project is focused on the stories DarWin wants to tell – about the environment, humanity, life…"

Greg, you tracked remotely. But Mohini, you were in the studio. What are your memories?

Mohini: "I remember Simon setting up his big drum kit because he loves to record bass and drums together. So nothing is chopped, it's all live takes and very rarely does that happen now. I love being in the same room, picking up a part in five minutes, then doing a take when the adrenaline is flowing. I like being put on the spot, that's my strength.

"Simon already had such beautiful basslines laid out that I didn't have to do too much. But will I suggest changes? Absolutely. I have complete freedom to improvise, like on *Man Vs Machine*. And most of the time Simon welcomes that. DarWin and I, we have this joke that I bring up his ideas because Simon is more likely to listen to me!"

How do you write parts to complement DarWin's dystopian lyrical themes?

Greg: "It's a fun challenge. I'm getting into the DigiTech Whammy DT because it instantly makes anything you do sound very synthetic and non-organic. So it's good for injecting that kind of futuristic feel. But there's also a sort of sadness when we think about the future. There's a bleakness. So I'm trying to inject that into my playing, too."

What sort of tone were you shooting for?

Greg: "If you take a generic electric guitar at a music store, plug into a generic high-gain amplifier and put everything at 12 o'clock, it's usually not a pleasant sound. It's usually something that has to be tweaked to make it cool, y'know? So I'm just

1. DarWin (who takes on rhythm guitar) on piano, Simon Phillips on drums and bassist Mohini Rey record in the studio, while numerous other artists, including Greg Howe on lead guitar, track remotely

PHOTO COURTESY DARWIN

looking for the same things in my tone that I'd be looking for in any instrument. I want it to be warm and smooth, like a nice voice. When something is too bright or piercing, I'm like, 'Well, you wouldn't want that if it was a violin, so why would I want it?'"

Mohini: "Simon likes the bass tone very clean, not too dirty, no distortion. He's not a big fan of slap bass or too many ghost notes."

What was your rig for *Distorted Mirror*, Greg?

Greg: "Simon is a big fan of real amps because he's old-school. There was my Cornford MK50, which is my favourite amp in the world and the only one where I don't need anything in front. I used a Marshall JCM 2000 DSL, usually with a Tube Screamer. I have a signature amp with DV Mark called the Little GH 250. It's solid-state, and just to hear that come out of my mouth feels sacrilegious, but it sounds great, very tube-like.

"My favourite wah is the original Cry Baby. So I asked Dunlop, 'Is there anything like that but true bypass?' And they said the closest thing was the Buddy Guy wah. I've got a signature Carl Martin overdrive, the Greg Howe Lick Box. I'll confess, I've got into situations in the past where my name is attached to a product and when I plug it in, I'm like, 'Ugh, really?' But this one, I really am proud of it.

"I've been using my Kiesel Lyra signature guitar. There's a Seymour Duncan Whole Lotta Humbucker in the bridge, which was a placeholder until I figured out what I really wanted. But it's still there. This guitar has a very thick sound, not as snappy or Strat-y as others I have. The frets are a harder metal than nickel, so they last longer. But they're not as hard as stainless steel, so luthiers don't get mad at you when you have work done."

How about your key gear, Mohini?

Mohini: "I used my Mayones Comodous Classic 5. It's my baby and there's something about it – the attack, the tightness and tonality functions – that's just close to my heart. On the last album [*Five Steps On The Sun*], for the song *Be That Man*, I needed to tune my B string down to A, and it's very rare you can do that without buzzing. But this bass can handle rare situations – and take a beating!

"My favourite amp is the Markbass Standard 104HF cabinet with the Little Mark 800. I just love the combination of that tube head with the Aguilar OBP-3 preamp in my bass: the depth, clarity, definition, attack and headroom. I have my Mid High [control] on the head full up and the same on my bass EQ. That's where I get my bridge-heavy tone. I always look for that clarity because I play very fast notes and I hate it sounding muffly."

Mohini and Greg, what do you think of each other's playing?

Mohini: "You really hear Greg on this album. He's given complete freedom to rock out on his solos, and

> *"The guitar is so versatile – we have a long way to go until we start to wonder if there's any room left for expansion"* GREG HOWE

2. Greg Howe has a large solo discography and has featured in collaborations with Simon Phillips and Richie Kotzen, as well as playing live with pop mega-acts such as Michael Jackson, Rihanna and Justin Timberlake

3. Mohini, Simon and DarWin in the studio

2

PHOTO BY TIFFANY WEST

“When technical mastery combines with soul, the result is quite magnificent”

DARWIN

3

PHOTO BY SIMONE LOMBAR

MYSTERY MAN

A rare encounter with the enigmatic DarWin…

What was your founding vision for DarWin?
“Simon and I wanted to make great-sounding songs that fit together thematically in an album experience. We felt the art is getting a bit lost and that we still had a few ideas left. We also felt that sometimes rock music can become a bit repetitive, but there are plenty of ideas, approaches and emotions left to explore. Importantly, we wanted to do old-school production in a studio environment, under Simon’s leadership, and enjoy the creative experience that comes with that.”

You’re also a great player. How do you divide the guitar parts between you and Greg?
“Greg is just a rare kind of genius. He does so many incredible technical things, but in a way that always serves the song, concept and melody, and still brings the fireworks. His mastery of music, via the guitar, should probably be researched by scientists. It’s clear that he needs to be doing our solos. I basically play the rhythm parts, which are the core song structure and how the songs are usually written, and Greg shreds the solos.”

What atmosphere did you want the guitars to have on the record?
“There are many different types of songs, including ballads. Those shimmering clean electric guitar sounds – like *Rising Distortion* or *Loophole* – are all going through a beautiful Cold War-era Leslie. The guitar tone needs to shake a speaker cone in a certain way when it combines with the bass sound. It’s a bit Megadeth or Metallica. However, for the ballads, Jesse Siebenberg plays such wonderful acoustic and lap steel that I stay out of his way.”

What was the most important gear that you used in the studio?
“I play various Kiesel Aries with Lithium pickups, a Victory Kraken VX MKII, and often a Mesa/Boogie 5:25 via a Marshall 4x12 or Bogner cab – and basically no effects ever. Usually, the heavy rhythm guitars are doubled with both Kraken and Mesa/Boogie played tracks to make them extra thick and juicy. Then we have the ancient and wise Leslie for a mysterious clean sound. It is just all guitar pickups to speaker cone, really.”

When it comes to guitar, how do you keep your playing fresh?
“I hit a wall with standard tunings after our first double album, *Origin Of Species*. Then I started detuning the low E string and things got exciting again – for another four albums. Now, I usually have a 0.056 gauge string on the low E – I don’t like playing seven-strings so I just push the low string as far as I can. When I play in drop C, I usually also drop the high E to C. That’s what gives *Rising Distortion* that mystical sound. A lot has been done with guitar, but I think it will continue to surprise us. When technical mastery combines with soul, and enough electrical power to charge a Tesla, the result is quite magnificent.”

The internet has stripped so much mystique from rock ’n’ roll. Why do you choose to remain such a mysterious figure?
“I think we live in an era when most young people want to be professional influencers and we are addicted to getting likes on social media. I want to participate in the system only to the extent that the music can delight the listener and somehow give them a lift.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF DARWIN

you can hear the stories and energy just flow through him.”

Greg: “Mohini is phenomenal. She does things on bass I’ve simply never heard done before. She can really bring it: she’s got crazy chops. But she’s got a nice feel, a great rhythmic sense – and she can really get funky. I didn’t know that about her. I knew she’d have all the time-signature stuff. But some of my stuff is real ‘pocket’ funk, like head-nod shit, so I was a little concerned, like, ‘I hope she gets that.’ And she totally gets that.”

Mohini, how has your background helped prepare you for DarWin?

Mohini: “I didn’t consciously choose to play bass – it was just handed to me at three years old. My dad was a touring musician and he had plans for me. He saw a spark in my eyes and wanted to finesse that. Other dads weren’t even paying attention to their kids, but mine gave so much to me, to the point I started to rebel against it. Here in America, I feel like parents are chill, but the culture I come from is so strict. Music was like school. That’s why I got so good. I didn’t have any other option. I had no choice but to excel.

“I feel like I’ve had breakthroughs in different phases of my life. Growing up in India, I’ve been working professionally since the age of nine – and I’m 29 now. Early on, I was playing with Bollywood artists, and I feel like certain doors opened when I got the AR Rahman gig or played for MTV India. But then, two years ago when I moved to America, I got the Willow Smith gig and that was a turning point. Right after that, I got signed by a management agency for my own music and tour. Now I’m playing at all these European jazz festivals.”

4. A bassist since the age of three and pro since age nine, Mohini Dey experienced an extremely disciplined musical upbringing in her native India, and now lives in the USA where she has toured with Willow Smith

PHOTO BY @VASTISTANBUL

“Every time I hear these songs, I’m just like, ‘Wow, this deserves to be on stage.’ I think it’s just a matter of time…” MOHINI DEY

Of course, your career has many chapters too, Greg. Do you recognise your playing on the late-80s Shrapnel Records releases, say, or as a sideman for Michael Jackson in the 90s?

Greg: “Some of the old stuff, I listen to now and go, ‘Wow, I wish I could redo that.’ But there are other things when I was in my mid-20s and I’m thinking, ‘If I could meet that version of Greg Howe, I’d give him a pat on the back.’ Like, ‘Not bad.’

“The Michael Jackson tour? It was amazing. Everything was bigger than life. Top-notch hotels with gold fixtures. A private jet, with flight attendants, just for the band. It was fun playing the *Beat It* solo live. I had to walk out there with Michael, and he’s all pumped up, looking you right in the eyes. And it’s a little intimidating. Because you can feel that he’s saying, like, ‘Come on, get into it, bring it!’ And I’m like, ‘Well, I’m trying to bring it, but I gotta play the right notes!’ I remember, one night, he grabbed me and spun me around, in the middle of the solo. And I’m thinking, ‘What did that sound like out front, coming through million-watt speakers…?’”

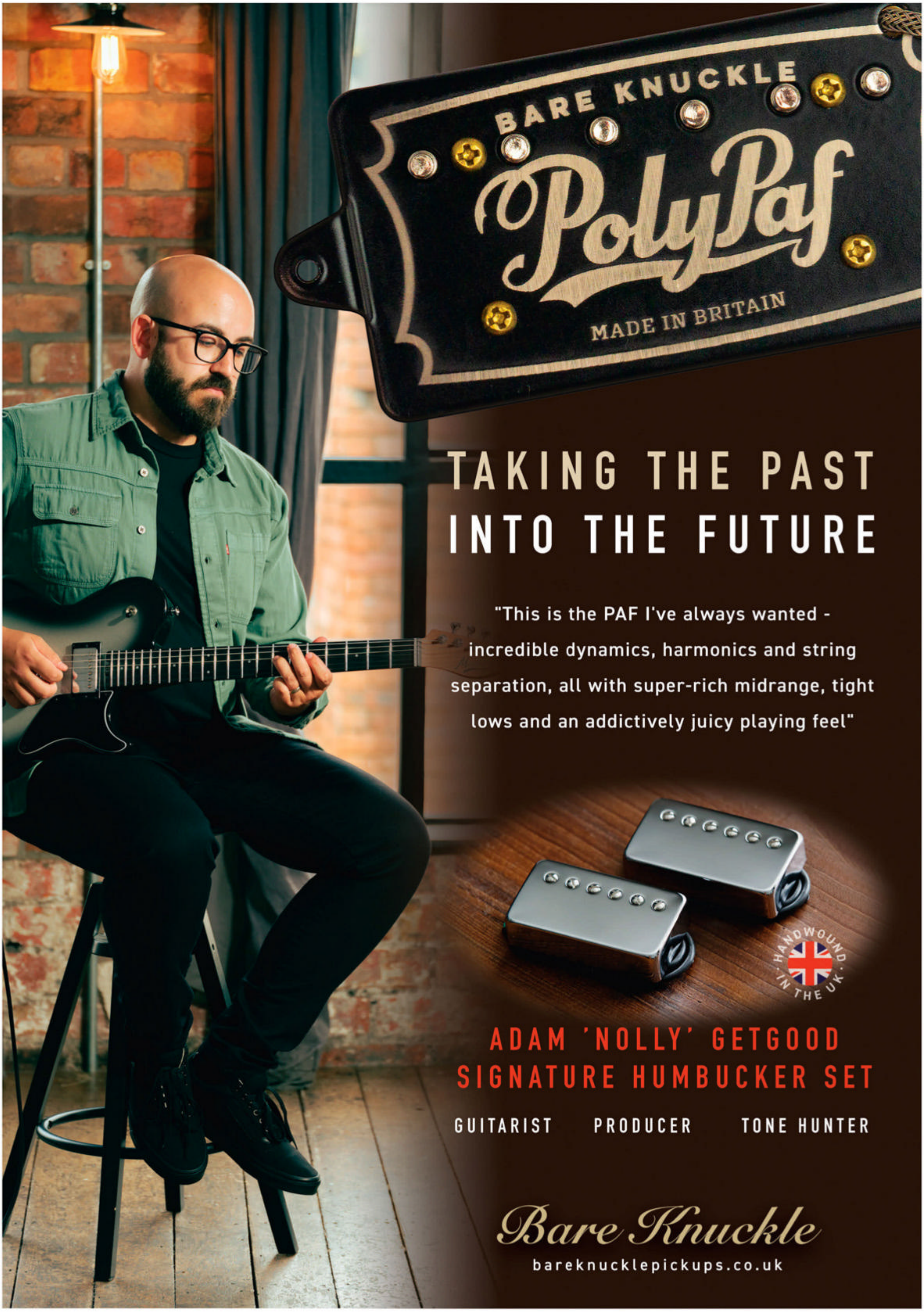
Do you think there’s still gas in the tank for guitar-based music?

Greg: “I do. It’s interesting how these questions are always asked about guitar, not saxophone or piano. The guitar is such a versatile instrument and there’s so many different ways to play it – I think we have a long way to go until we start to sincerely wonder if there’s any room left for expansion. I see new techniques all the time. New tunings. New equipment. I don’t think we’re even close to the end.”

Finally, do you think DarWin could go on the road?

Mohini: “It’s difficult because everybody is their own artist and so busy with their own thing. But Simon tells me he gets approached after shows and asked, ‘Hey, when are you doing a DarWin tour?’ I get the same thing on my tour. And every time I hear these songs, I’m just like, ‘Wow, this deserves to be on stage.’ So I think it’s just a matter of time…” G

DarWin’s new album, Distorted Mirror, is out now on OoS/Phantom Recordings ***https://darwin.is***


BARE KNUCKLE
PolyPaf
MADE IN BRITAIN
HANDWOUND IN THE UK

TAKING THE PAST
INTO THE FUTURE

"This is the PAF I've always wanted - incredible dynamics, harmonics and string separation, all with super-rich midrange, tight lows and an addictively juicy playing feel"

ADAM 'NOLLY' GETGOOD
SIGNATURE HUMBUCKER SET

GUITARIST PRODUCER TONE HUNTER

Bare Knuckle
bareknucklepickups.co.uk

QUALITY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
★ Original ★
HISTORIC
HARDWARE
100% GUARANTEED
★★★

MARY KAYE STRATOCASTER

Mary Kaye models are probably the most desirable of all 1950s Fenders, so the very first one made must be the ultimate vintage Strat

Words Huw Price **Photography** Matt Lincoln

Gretsch had the Chet Atkins 6120, and Gibson offered various Les Pauls – but Fender's most famous artist signature model was never officially anything of the sort. It's maybe because the guitars were selling like hot cakes that Fender is better remembered for its manufacturing processes than marketing strategies.

Unlike all the other big US guitar manufacturers, Fender never bothered with artist signature models during the pre-CBS era. Even so, the Mary Kaye Stratocaster eventually acquired that status in a de facto sort of way and has become the 'holy grail' of vintage Fenders for many serious collectors.

There was nothing fancy about the neck profile, the pickups or the wiring. In fact, only two features distinguished a Mary Kaye Stratocaster from any other Stratocaster that might have rolled off Fender's production line during the mid-to-late 1950s. The most immediately recognisable was a translucent blonde finish over an ash body.

By 1955, the 'butterscotch' finish Fender applied to Broadcasters, Nocasters and early Telecasters was being replaced by an off-white 'blonde' finish to match the newly introduced white pickguard. Although sunburst was the standard Stratocaster finish, blonde examples have been documented from early 1955 onwards, but they came with regular chrome and nickel-plated hardware. To be a true 'Mary Kaye', a Strat must also have factory-fitted 14-karat gold-plated hardware.

Keys To Kayes

It is widely accepted that a Stratocaster currently owned by Phil Hylander (of Seven Decades) was the first to leave the Fender factory with a blonde finish and gold hardware, and it's the actual guitar that was pictured in the hands of Mary Kaye. The body is dated January 1956 and it carries the serial number 09391, but the neck is a period replacement – and we'll get into that later.

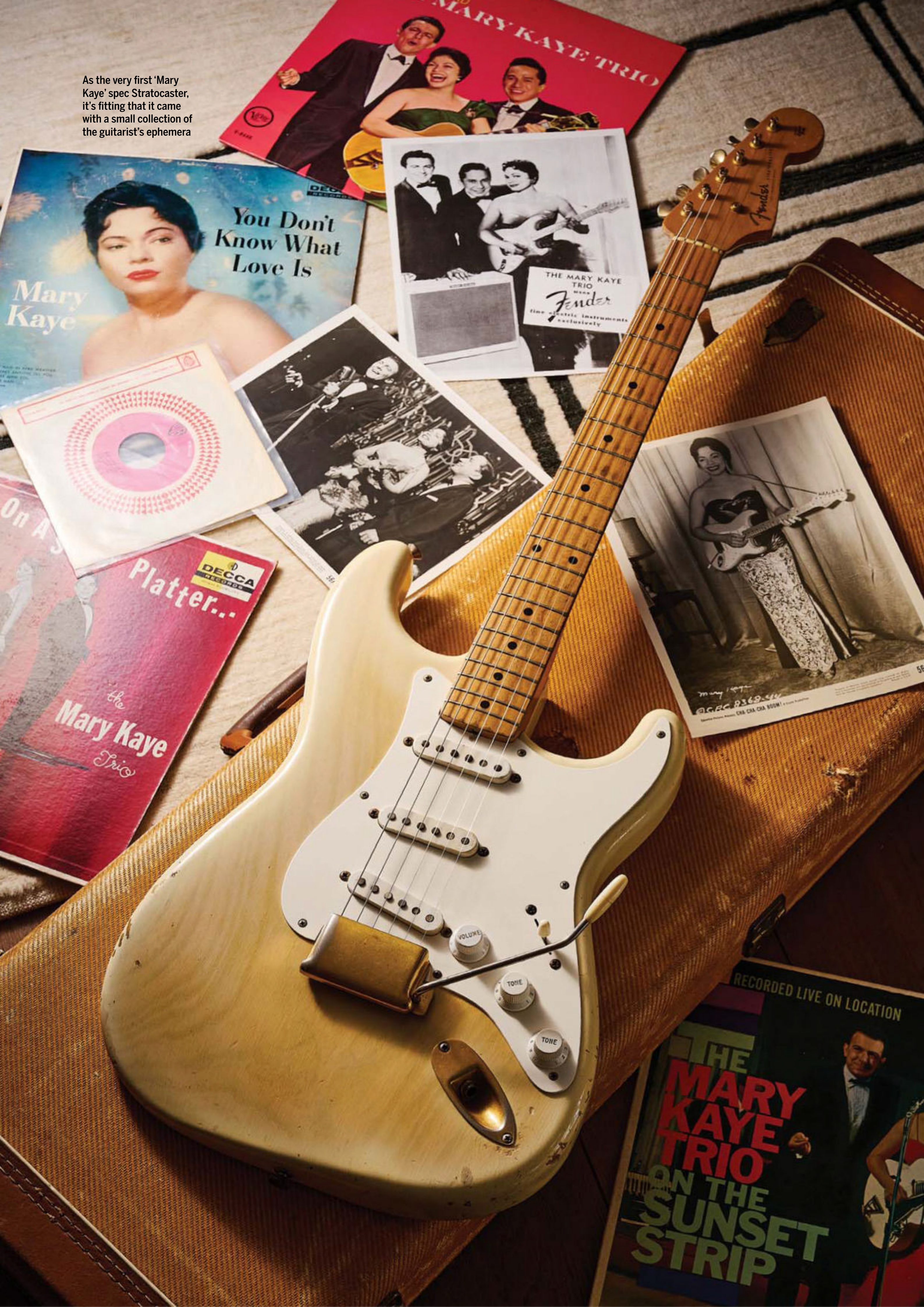
A previous owner called Iain Ashley Hersey researched the guitar's history for a 2003 article in *Vintage Guitar* magazine. According to Hersey, the blonde/gold combination wasn't officially offered to the public until 1957. In February 1957, Fender announced it in *The Music Trades* with a list price of $330. A sunburst Strat would have cost $274.50 that same year.

For its first six months, the guitar was kept in Don Randall's office. During that period the guitar was photographed with Mary Kaye and her trio before an early 1956 performance at the Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas. As a publicity shot, the original backstage photo was somewhat less than ideal because the headstock was in shadow and the Fender logo was almost impossible to make out. In other versions, the end of the fretboard and the headstock were crudely retouched and a larger than life logo was added. It was Mary's understanding that the guitar was hers to keep, but the Fender employee who brought the guitar to the photoshoot took it back with him.

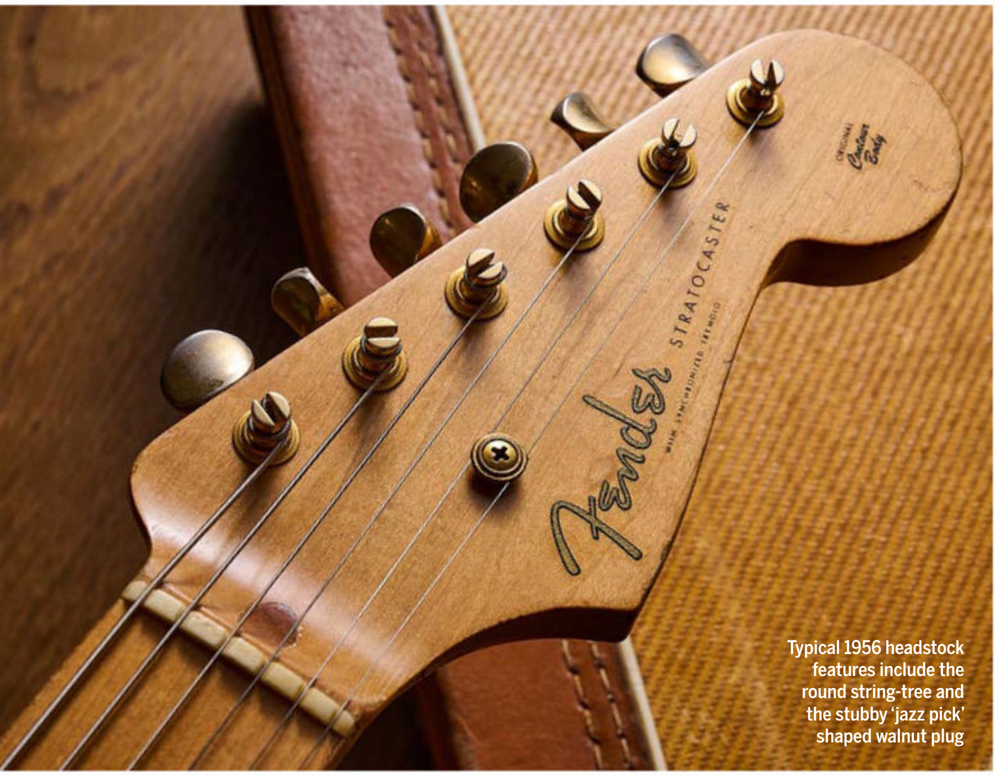
Mary was briefly reunited with the guitar when she appeared in a movie called *Cha-Cha-Cha Boom!* and used it while miming to three numbers. If you watch the footage you'll see the guitar, but you won't be able to hear it. The rhythm guitar on the tracks sounds like an archtop to us.

After the shoot, the guitar once again went back to Fender and next appeared at the Summer NAMM Show in New York. There it was demo'd by Johnny Cucci, and at the end of the show Don Randall told him: "Well, since you've been playing it for four days, we can't exactly sell it as new… so we would like you to have it."

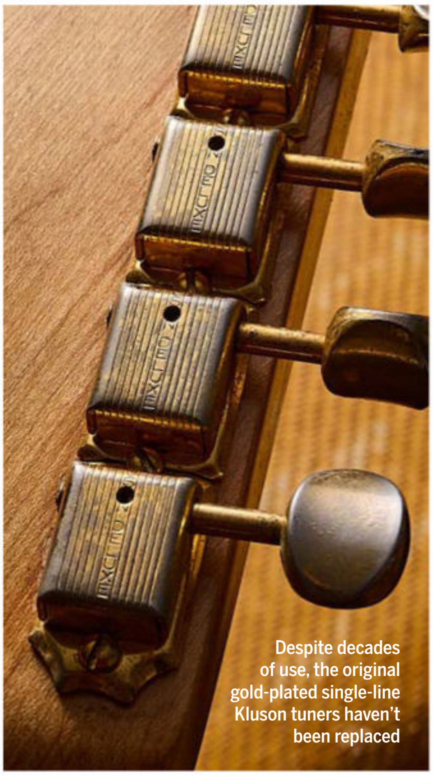
Although primarily a jazz player, Cucci favoured the Strat over his Gibson Super 400 and D'Angelico archtops. Johnny Cucci and his lap-steel-playing musical partner Jody Carver had a band, and on their 1958 recording *Hot Club Of America In Hi-Fi*, you can hear the Strat being put through its paces by a very decent player.


MARY KAYE TRIO
You Don't Know What Love Is
Mary Kaye
DECCA RECORDS
On A
Platter...
the Mary Kaye Trio
THE MARY KAYE TRIO uses Fender fine electric instruments exclusively
CHA CHA CHA BOOM!
VOLUME
TONE
TONE
RECORDED LIVE ON LOCATION
THE MARY KAYE TRIO ON THE SUNSET STRIP

As the very first 'Mary Kaye' spec Stratocaster, it's fitting that it came with a small collection of the guitarist's ephemera



Typical 1956 headstock features include the round string-tree and the stubby 'jazz pick' shaped walnut plug



Despite decades of use, the original gold-plated single-line Kluson tuners haven't been replaced

The album cover features a wonderful photo of Cucci with the guitar, and the accomplished but profoundly odd music sounds like a heavily sedated Les Paul attempting to sightread a Sergio Leone score for a David Lynch movie with a backing band of inebriated Hawaiians. It's a rare treat.

Soon after Cucci acquired it, however, the neck developed a twist. Having turned down Randall's offer of a new guitar, a replacement neck was sent on the proviso that the original was returned to Fender 'for inspection'. This replacement neck was dated September 1956 and has remained with the guitar ever since – just as the guitar remained with John Cucci until he sold it to Guitar Trader in New Jersey in early 1982. They sold it to Jimmy Crespo, who had replaced Joe Perry in Aerosmith, and he used it to record the rhythm parts on their *Rock In a Hard Place* album.

The guitar continued to go back and forth between Crespo and Guitar Trader until the late 80s, when it passed through several owners and was eventually offered to John Entwistle as part of a large collection. In return for his help in arranging the deal, Entwistle gave the Strat to guitar tech extraordinaire Alan Rogan. In the summer of 1995, Rogan traded the Strat with Lloyd Chiate of Voltage Guitars in Hollywood, who subsequently sold it to Iain Ashley Hersey.

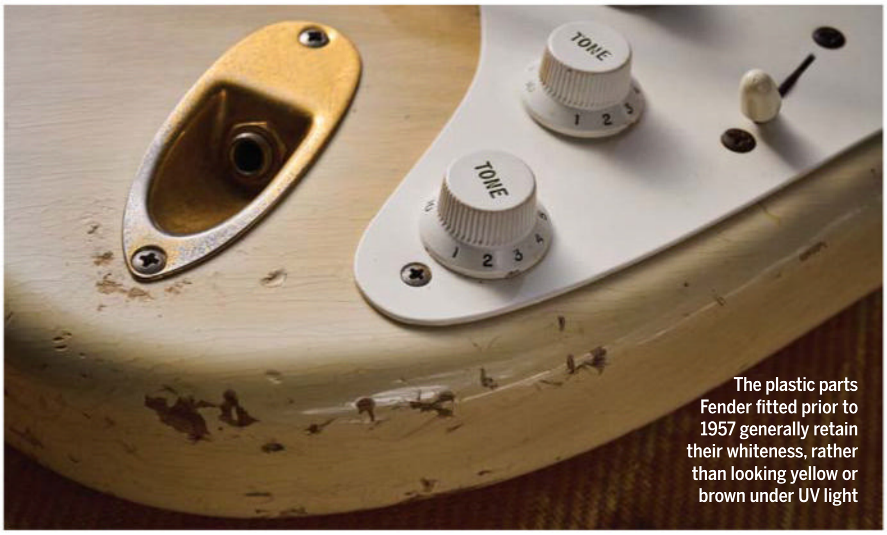
From him, it eventually went to a collector and, so far as we can tell, the most recent sale went through Julien's Auctions when, in early 2025, it achieved a hammer price of $224,000. Prior to the sale, the guitar was thoroughly inspected and played by Julien's in-house appraiser Mike Adams.

"It looked like a one-piece body to me," Mike recalls, "because I couldn't detect any seams. I didn't make notes about the weight, but it certainly didn't impress me as being heavy. The neck has a very soft V profile with a nut width of 1.65 inches and a depth of 0.94 inches at the 1st fret, and by the 12th fret it only gets up to 0.98 inches. So the depth doesn't change a whole lot, but it's a big neck.

"The original Stackpole potentiometers date to the 36th week of 1955," Mike continues, "and my pickup readings were 5.9k[ohms], 5.71k and 5.74k at the neck, middle and bridge respectively. It's a lovely set of pickups – not too bright at the bridge and very full-sounding in the neck position. Having looked under the hood, I can say that a treble bleed network was installed and there was a blue ground wire that was non-original. It sounds fantastic and it's just such an impressive instrument."

Gold Standard

In its almost 70 years of existence, the guitar has seen periods or regular use and, presumably, years of relative inactivity as it languished in various collections. As a result, this first Mary Kaye Stratocaster remains in superb condition, and even the



The plastic parts Fender fitted prior to 1957 generally retain their whiteness, rather than looking yellow or brown under UV light

WHO WAS MARY KAYE? A closer look at the player behind the name

The oft-cited moniker 'First Lady Of Rock 'N' Roll' may have been a bit over-egged from a musical standpoint, but Mary Kaye was of royal Hawaiian blood. She claimed to be related to Queen Lili'uokalani, the last reigning monarch of Hawaii, through her paternal line.

Mary was born Malia Ka'aihue on 9 January 1924 in Detroit, Michigan, and grew up in St Louis. Having started on ukulele and guitar aged nine, Mary began performing in her father's band, alongside her brother Norman, from the age of 12. She eventually formed her own band, the Mary Ka'aihue Trio, but Norman persuaded her to change to the name Mary Kaye Trio because audiences might assume they only played Hawaiian music. Mary was also getting tired of people calling her "Mary K-something" because they couldn't pronounce her name.

The Trio found success performing in Las Vegas hotel venues such as the Last Frontier, Sahara and Tropicana, and have been credited as pioneers of the Las Vegas 'lounge act' phenomenon. Mary always considered herself a jazz singer and was flattered when people compared her to Ella Fitzgerald. Louis Armstrong was a fan, and he told Mary that he always listened to her version of *My Funny Valentine* before going onstage.

The Mary Kaye Trio tended to play very late at night, often for other well-known artists who had performed earlier in the evening. Big names included Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich, assorted members of the 'Rat Pack' and Elvis Presley.

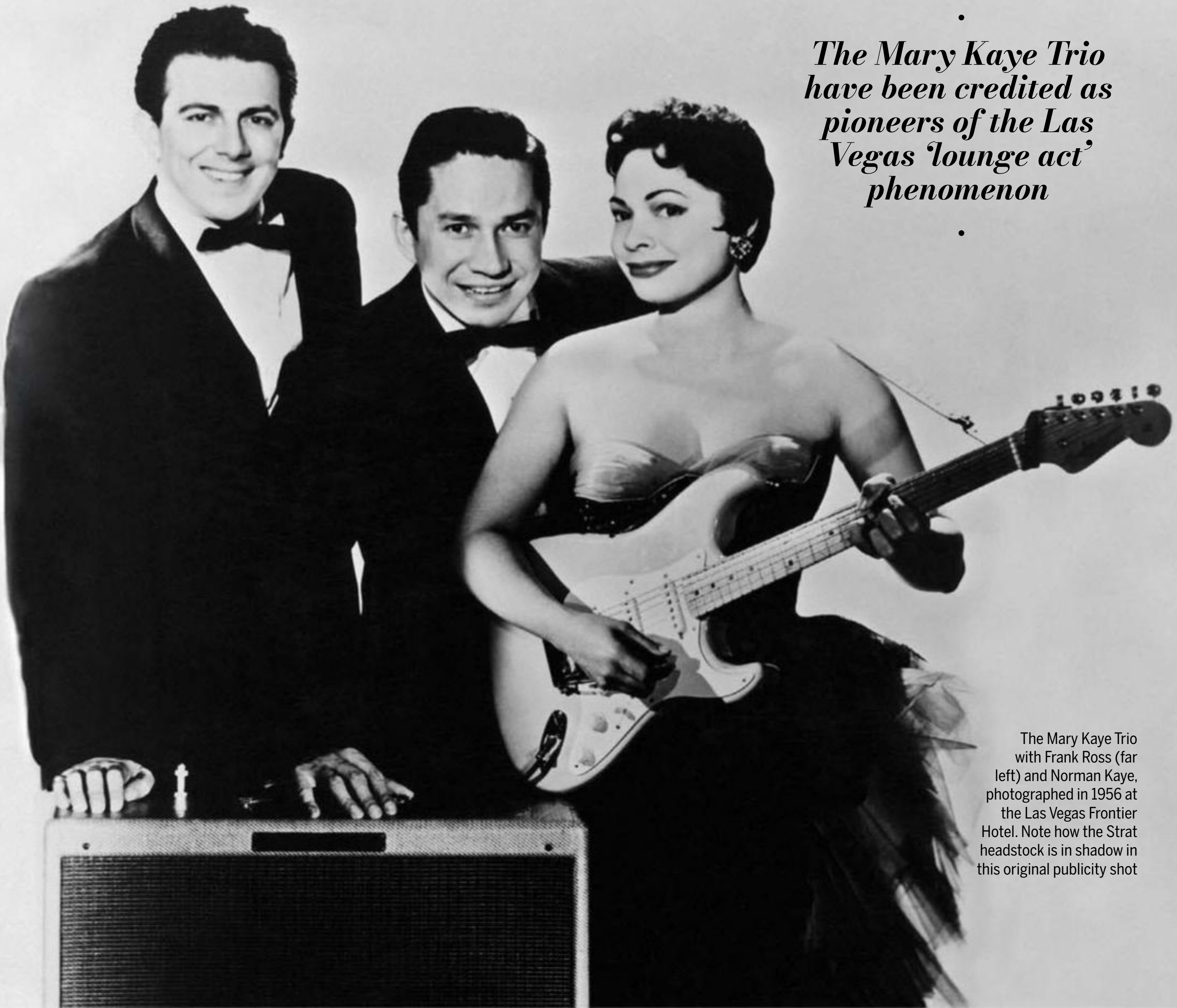
Describing her guitar playing, Mary once said: "I played jazz guitar. Not solos but pretty symphonic chords that a lot of players don't know." Having played acoustically until 1949, she then used an archtop built for her by John D'Angelico in which he installed a pickup.

Mary's association with Fender pre-dated the 1956 photoshoot. She had known Freddie Tavares – an underappreciated figure in Fender's early years – when he played in her father's band, and a fellow Las Vegas lounge guitarist called Steve Gibson first introduced her to Don Randall. He supplied Mary with the Fender amplifiers she used throughout her career.

Mary visited the Fender factory, where she met Leo himself, and Randall actually offered Mary a Fender guitar in 1954. On that occasion she turned him down, but after posing for the blonde Stratocaster publicity shots and appearing with it in a movie, Mary and her manager Billy Burton were under the impression the guitar would be hers to keep. She told *Vintage Guitar* magazine: "By this time, everyone was referring to it as the 'Mary Kaye Strat' and I remember Billy was upset that the guitar was returned to Fender after Leo Fender had promised it to me. We were too busy with The Trio's career to ever look back and correct the mistake."

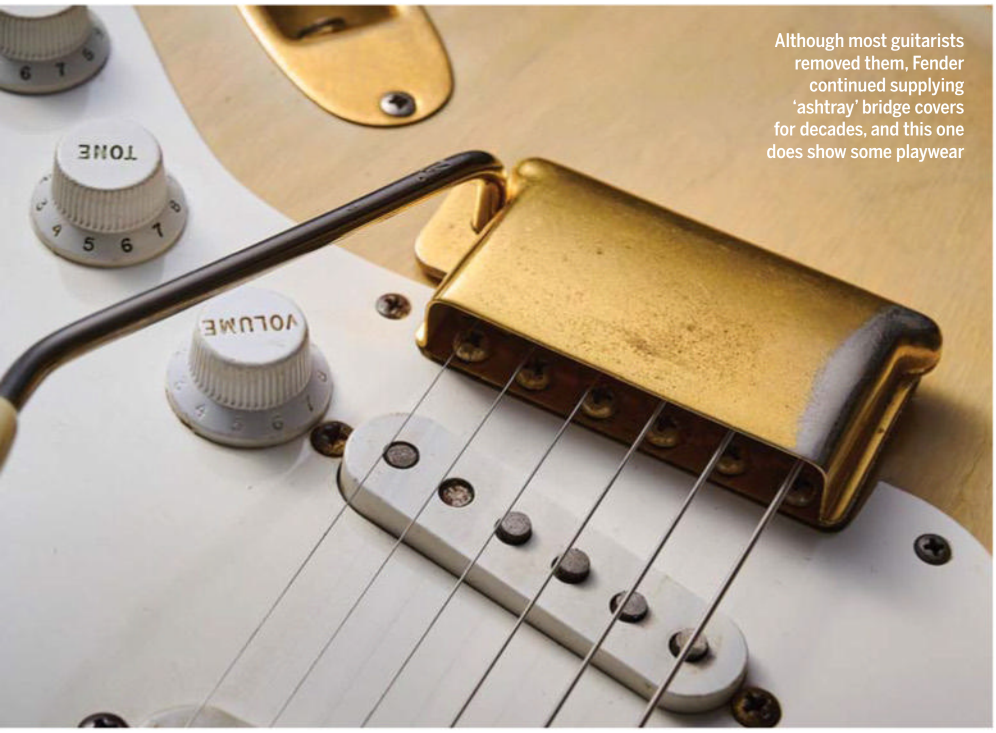
Although Mary's original trio split in 1966, Mary continued working until 1979, when health issues forced her to quit. During the early 1980s she lived in San Fernando Valley, California, where she operated the Mary Kaye Doll Company. In 1986, Mary moved to Las Vegas to live with her daughter, Donna, and she remained there until her death from pulmonary disease on 17 February 2007.

> *The Mary Kaye Trio have been credited as pioneers of the Las Vegas 'lounge act' phenomenon*

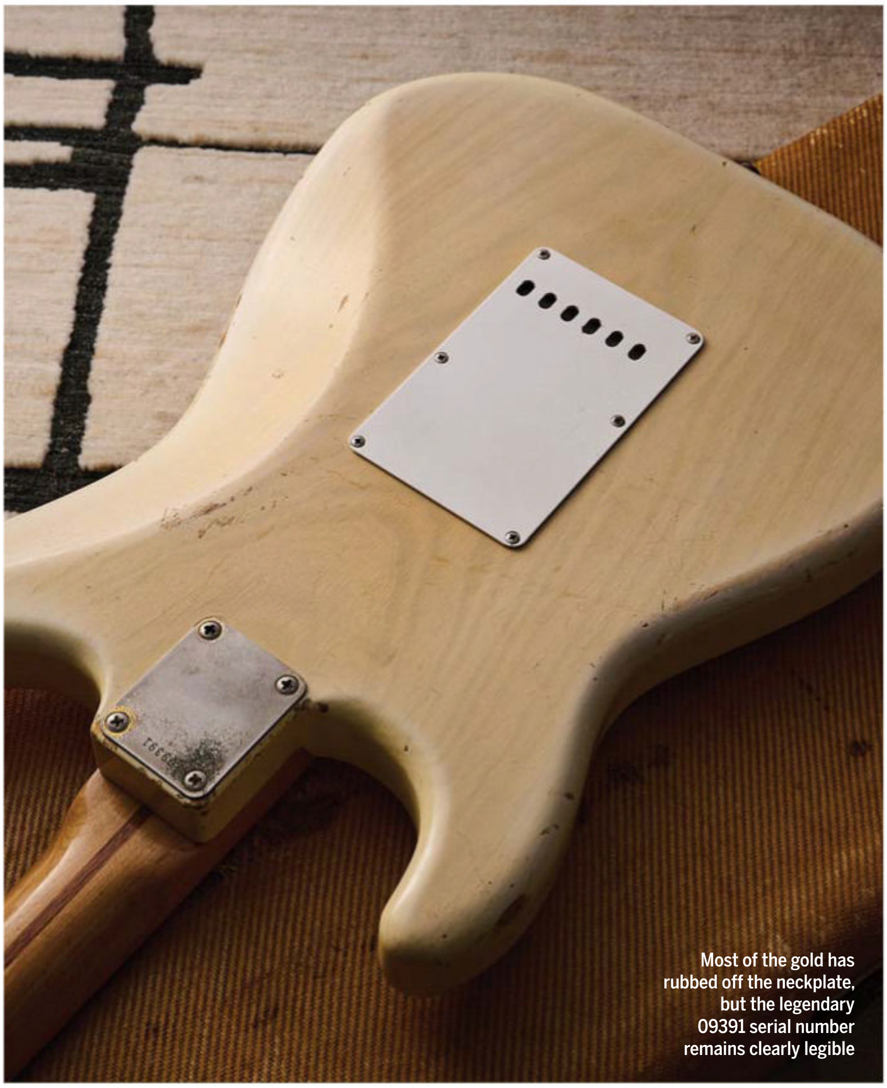


The Mary Kaye Trio with Frank Ross (far left) and Norman Kaye, photographed in 1956 at the Las Vegas Frontier Hotel. Note how the Strat headstock is in shadow in this original publicity shot

PHOTO BY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES



Although most guitarists removed them, Fender continued supplying 'ashtray' bridge covers for decades, and this one does show some playwear



Most of the gold has rubbed off the neckplate, but the legendary 09391 serial number remains clearly legible

notoriously damage-prone maple fretboard shows relatively minor fingerwear.

For an up-to-the-minute report on the current market for Mary Kaye Strats we consulted Mike Long of ATB Guitars. "They're well up there in the hierarchy of vintage Fenders," Mike confirms. "A really nice Broadcaster or an exceptionally rare custom colour pre-CBS Strat may come close, especially maple-neck Cinnamon Red examples from the 1950s. They're far less common, although Mary Kayes aren't exactly common, either. I would struggle to think of any Fender that surpasses a Mary Kaye Strat in value or collector appeal."

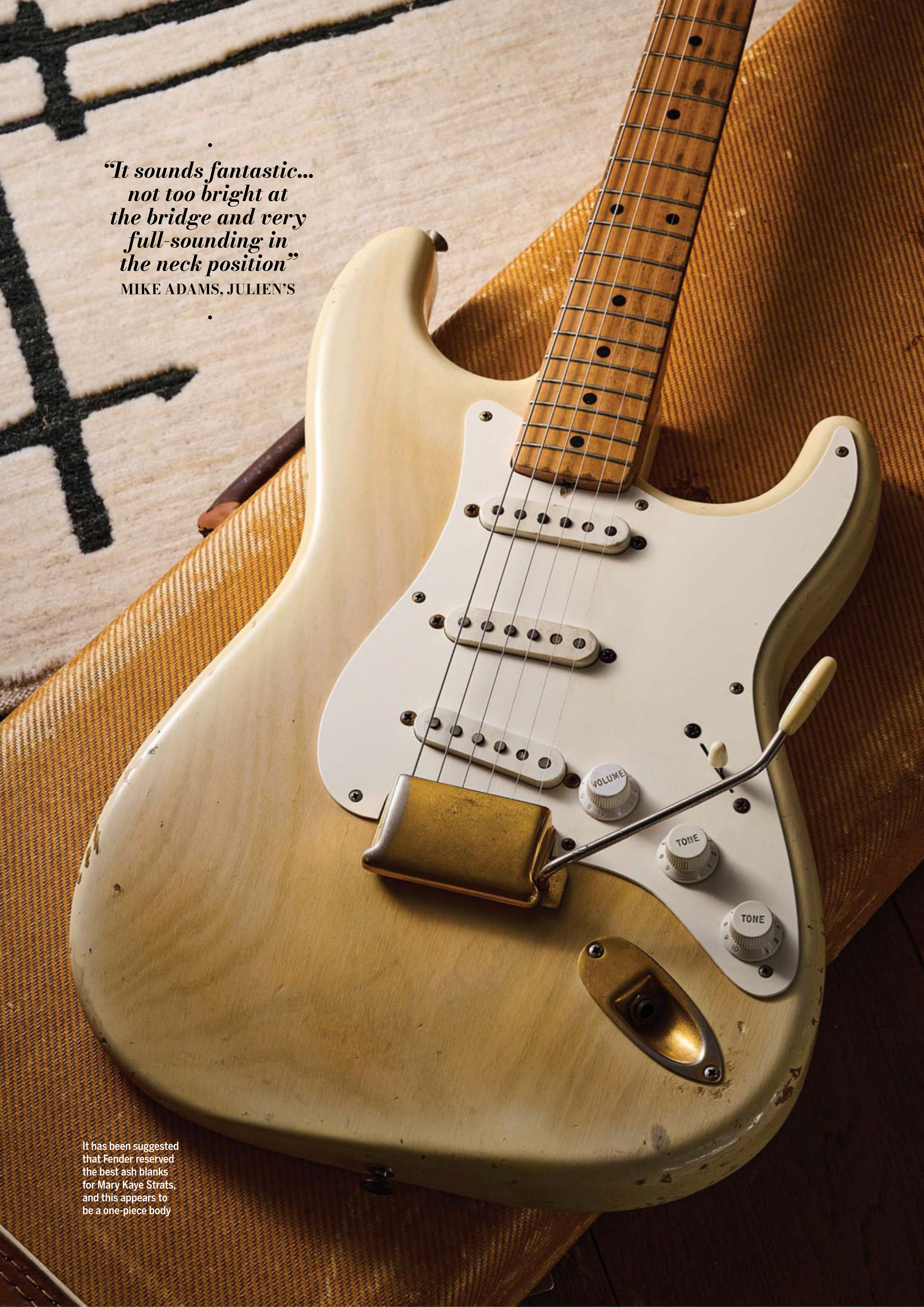
Since blonde was offered as a finish option, the danger for any prospective Mary Kaye owner is the possibility that gold hardware may have been added at a later date. "That's true," ATB's Mike Long agrees, "but the one part that those people attempting to create pretend Mary Kayes tend to overlook is the gold-plated truss rod adjuster. With the originals there is normally not a great deal of gold plating left, but if there are traces of gold it's a good sign that a Strat is a genuine Mary Kaye. We also look for evidence that the hardware has been swapped over, such as imprints in the wood that don't quite match the hardware and altered screw locations."

> *"I would struggle to think of any Fender that surpasses a Mary Kaye Strat in value or collector appeal"*
>
> **MIKE LONG, ATB GUITARS**

Almost half a century after Mary Kaye's name became inextricably linked with the most desirable incarnation of the Stratocaster, Fender finally made good on its promise. After much cajoling from Mary's nephew, she was presented with a brand-new Custom Shop Strat in 2002.

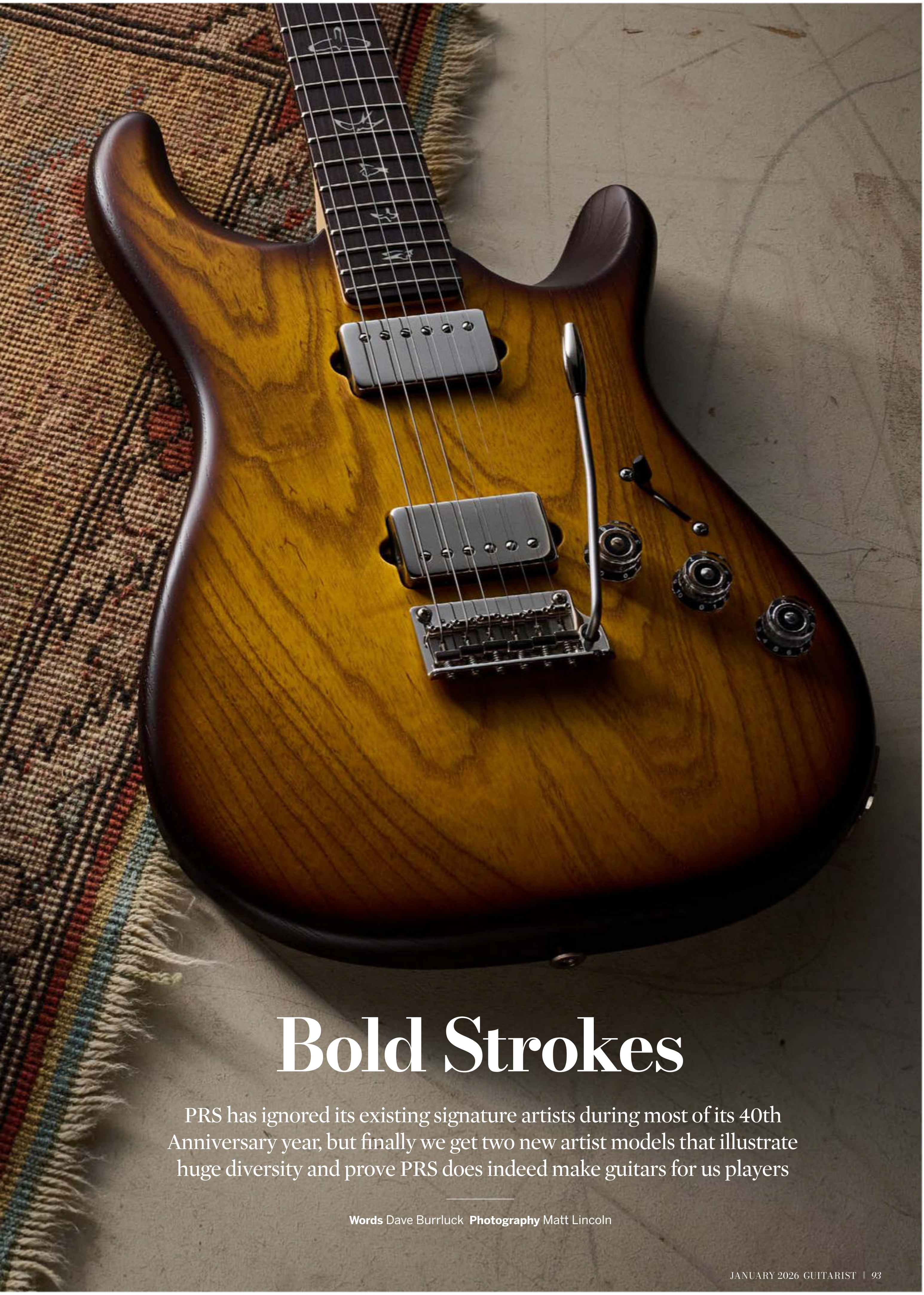
Although once devoted to her electrified D'Angelico, Mary eventually began playing a Telecaster, and in the three years leading up to Fender's gift, she had been playing a Squier Strat. Her new guitar came with a Custom Shop certificate that read 'Mary Kaye Stratocaster', serial #MK001, and the neckplate was inscribed: "To Mary Kaye from your friends at Fender." G

With thanks to Phil Hylander, Mike Adams of Julien's Auctions, and Mike Long of ATB Guitars



> *“It sounds fantastic… not too bright at the bridge and very full-sounding in the neck position”*
>
> MIKE ADAMS, JULIEN’S

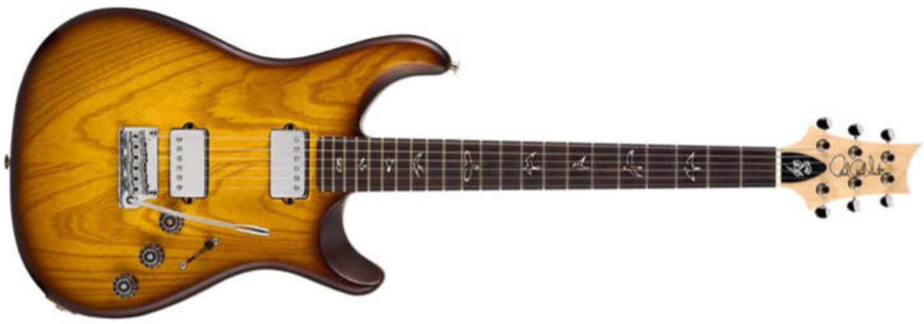
It has been suggested that Fender reserved the best ash blanks for Mary Kaye Strats, and this appears to be a one-piece body

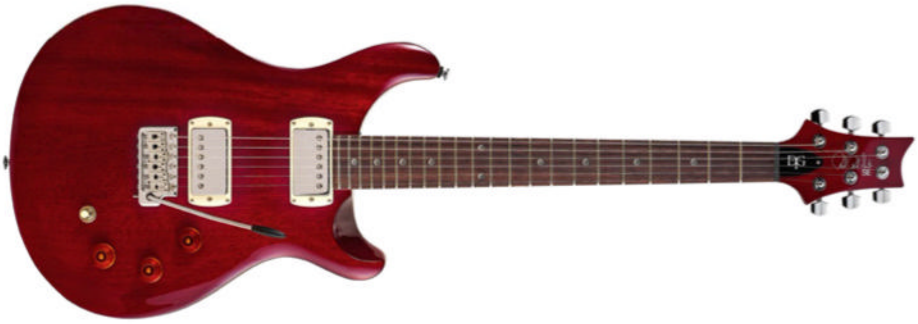


Bold Strokes

PRS has ignored its existing signature artists during most of its 40th Anniversary year, but finally we get two new artist models that illustrate huge diversity and prove PRS does indeed make guitars for us players

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Matt Lincoln





PRS FIORE HH & SE DGT STANDARD £2,599 & £779

CONTACT **PRS Europe** PHONE **01223 874301** WEB **www.prsguitars.com**

What You Need To Know

1. **These look a bit different. Where's the figured maple?**
You're right that the classic PRS guitar usually features a figured (or curly) maple top, but plenty of great players – and us mere mortals – prefer a less showy style.

2. **For example?**
Mark Lettieri's Fiore goes for quite classic bolt-on style using a swamp ash body, as does Myles Kennedy's signature and, of course, John Mayer's Silver Sky. David Grissom's DGT (Core and SE) does feature a figured maple top but not this new SE Standard. Then there's the non-signature Swamp Ash Special, NF 53, not to mention the S2 Standards, the Vela and new Mira and a host of SEs.

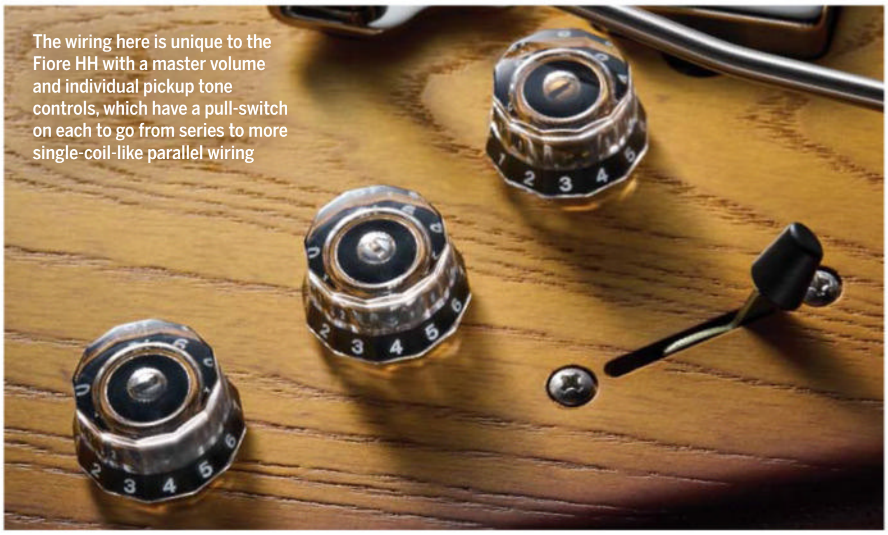
3. **But these aren't new guitars?**
Mark's original Fiore is a close cousin to our review model, but that one is HSS with a maple-only fingerboard; his new model is twin humbucking with a rosewood 'board. There was a short run of all-mahogany DGT Standards back in the day, but the maple-topped SE DGT joined the line-up in 2022. Our new Standard here is all-mahogany.

Satisfying artists has always been a prime objective of Paul Reed Smith, be it Ted Nugent, Howard Leese or Carlos Santana (back before his production company kicked off), or more contemporary players such as DragonForce's Herman Li. However, Herman's Chleo – a very, very different PRS with its Floyd Rose vibrato Fishman Fluence active pickups and a very un-PRS shape – has been the only brand-new artist signature model during this 40th Anniversary year.

Other artists haven't been totally forgotten, though, and just as the brand's celebratory year draws to a close, long-running signature artist David Grissom gets a new 'Standard' version of his SE DGT, while Mark Lettieri gets an HH version of his Fiore, which was first introduced in 2021. It'd been rude not to take a look…

Fiore HH Satin

For a guitarist with such impressive credentials, Mark Lettieri and the tools of his trade are anything but show-off. Pulling this new HH model from its gigbag, it may as well have 'working guitar' stamped on the headstock.



The wiring here is unique to the Fiore HH with a master volume and individual pickup tone controls, which have a pull-switch on each to go from series to more single-coil-like parallel wiring

1. The new Fiore has a rosewood fingerboard, as opposed to the maple of the first HSS Fiore. Both humbuckers direct-mount to the body, and with no scratchplate the pickup cavity routing is very tidy

2. 'Fiore' is Italian for 'flower', a name chosen by Mark's daughter. The floral logo on the truss rod cover was designed by Mark's artist mother

When we looked at Mark's original Fiore HSS model back in issue 475, as impressed as we were, it did come in on the heavy side for the style, not least that it employs a typically light-in-weight swamp ash body. The good news here is that, at 3.2kg (7.04lb), it's been to the gym, which just adds to the 'pick up and go' vibe.

Rather like how John Mayer's famed Silver Sky was a retooling of the Stratocaster, the Fiore's DNA comes from the good ol' hot-rod super-S and replicates the longer Fender scale-length with 22 frets. It has sleek horns combined with PRS's hallmark treble cutaway scoop and the usual body contouring of the style.

The satin nitro Sunflower finish is thin and doesn't fill the ash's identifying open-grain wavy streaks, but, those aside, it's silky smooth to the touch. The actual central top colour looks a little faded; the yellow is less bright than the gloss versions we've seen, which adds to the unshowy, almost used-guitar style, and you can see it's a two-piece centre-joined body.

Like PRS's other bolt-on models, there is a headstock splice, but here it's nearly invisible, the slab-sawn maple left quite white with no visible amber tinting. Another change here is the switch from a maple fingerboard of the HSS model to this dark brown Indian rosewood; the open bird inlays are stylish and less in your face than the solid or posh-shell birds of so many PRS models.

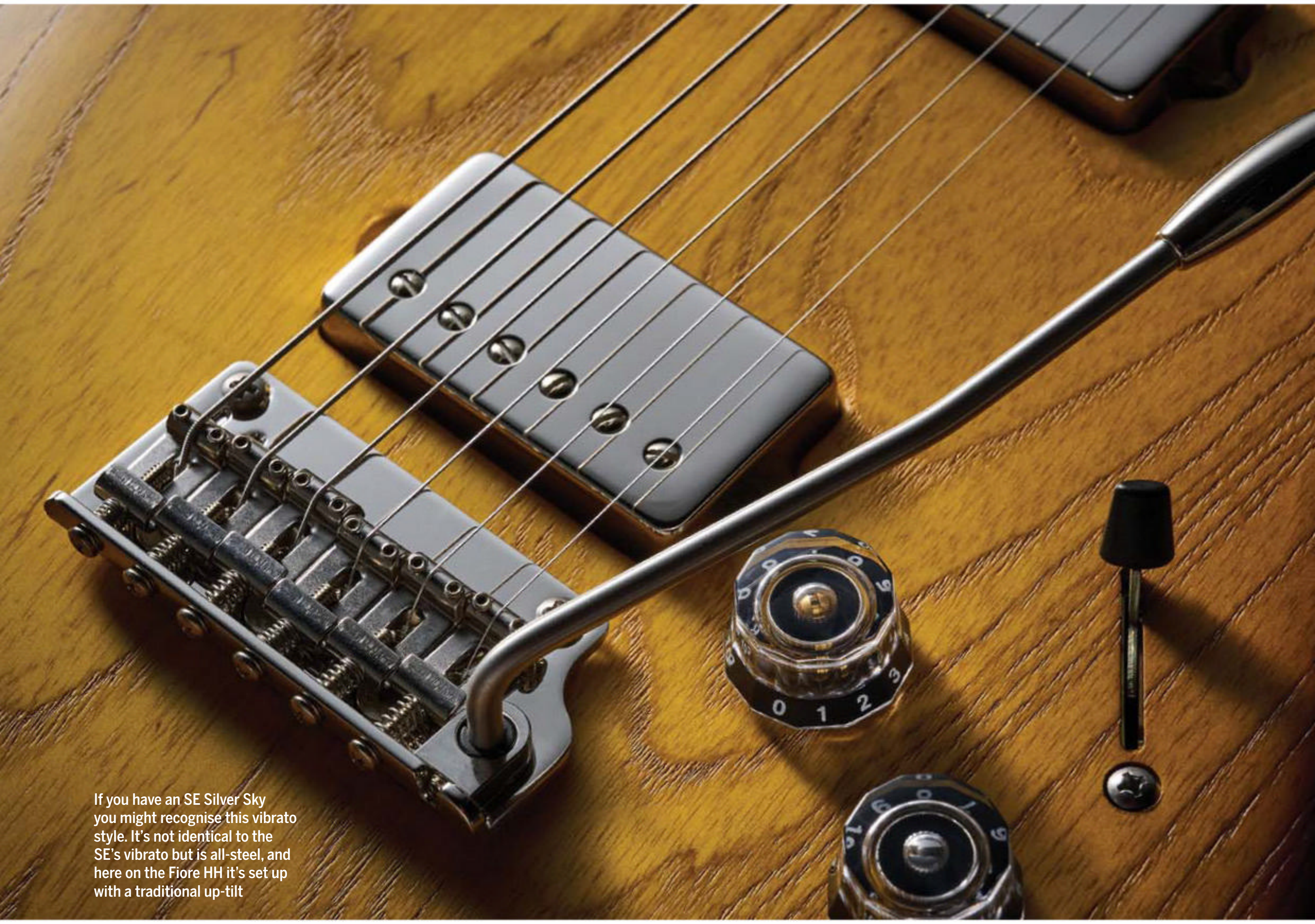
The hardware follows the original Fiore model, though, and you'll find vintage-style top-locking tuners and a two-post vibrato, which are seemingly the same as the ones used on the SE Silver Sky. The posts are 4.96mm bolts that thread into collars mounted in the body, rather than screws, while the pressed saddles are steel like the top plate and deep-drilled block. Then there's a push-in arm, here with a metal tip, plus swing tension adjustment. Unlike Mayer's guitars, there's an up-tilt to the vibrato, giving a semitone rise on the high E string, a minor 3rd on the G.

THE RIVALS

The all-mahogany, set-neck SE DGT Standard with vibrato style is actually quite unique within the PRS range, not least with its dual-volume/master tone setup. There are other SE bolt-on options, however, such as the SE CE 24 Standard (£449) with vibrato. Moving into the S2 range, there is more all-mahogany Standard choice with models like the new Mira 594 (from £1,699), although that's hardtail only with no vibrato option.

While the Fiore's super-S style is far less unique, HH models are much less common compared with HSS or HSH. Suhr has the Pete Thorn Signature Series Standard in its line-up, which retails around £3,899 and features Thornbucker humbuckers, Wilkinson vibrato and all-mahogany bolt-on construction, and Charvel has the Prashant Aswani signature Pro-Mod So-Cal PA28, retailing around £1k, with dual PA28 humbuckers, graphite-reinforced maple neck and alder body.

You might also be looking at some of the lesser-known or custom brands such as the UK-made super-S Cream T Polaris, which employs HH pickup swapping but not on vibrato models.



If you have an SE Silver Sky you might recognise this vibrato style. It's not identical to the SE's vibrato but is all-steel, and here on the Fiore HH it's set up with a traditional up-tilt

Along with the additional directly mounted Fiore humbucker at the neck, each individual pickup tone control is paired with a master volume and has a pull-switch that changes each pickup from standard series to parallel wiring. The previous model's five-way pickup selector changes to a three way.

SE DGT Standard

The DGT (David Grissom Tremolo) has its own fanbase within the PRS fraternity and in essence is an evolution of the McCarty model, of which David had quite a hand in. His original signature model appeared in 2007, but it wasn't until the end of 2022 that the much-anticipated SE version was launched, and this new 2025 addition simply changes the maple-topped body to all-mahogany, hence that Standard designation.

Both SEs are offered in McCarty Tobacco Sunburst, the maple-top level also gets a classic Gold Top, while the other option (as here) is a translucent Vintage Cherry. It gives us a chance to see the wood, of course, and the body is a three-piece spread – and, yes, you can see the slightly different grain patterns up close. It also features the SE's 'shallow violin' carve, which adds light dishing around the outer edges, although the main face remains flat. It really seems to suit this colour, and there's no posh figured maple to show off. The glued-in neck is a three-piece longitudinal laminate of mahogany.

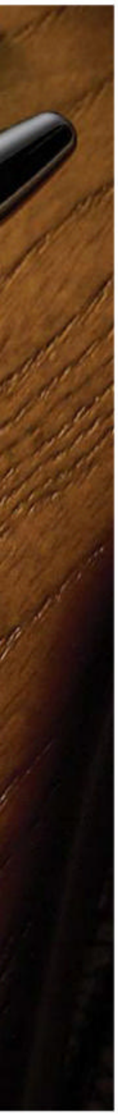
There's no change to the non-locking tuners or the cast steel vibrato that's used on plenty of SE, S2 and CE models. Over the years, and certainly on its USA models, PRS has moved to proprietary designed hardware from the vibrato, the locking tuners, even the Lampshade control knob and strap buttons.

While the lower-ticket SEs have historically stuck with more generic parts, they're changing and here we have the new, really stylish proprietary-design humbucking rings as used on the SE Paul's Guitar and more recently seen on the new-design SE Hollowbodies and the SE CE 24 Standard Stoptail Satin – more will undoubtedly follow. Yes, we get standard speed knobs, but they're also used on the Core model. David must prefer them!

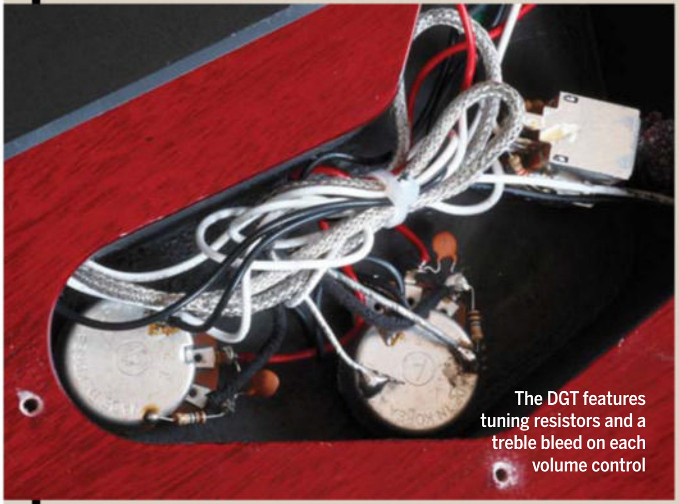
The DGT's control setup continues to use a volume for each pickup (the bridge pickup control is closest to the bridge) with the lower control being the master tone, which has a standard pull-switch so you can split the DGT 'S' pickups simultaneously, not individually.

Feel & Sounds

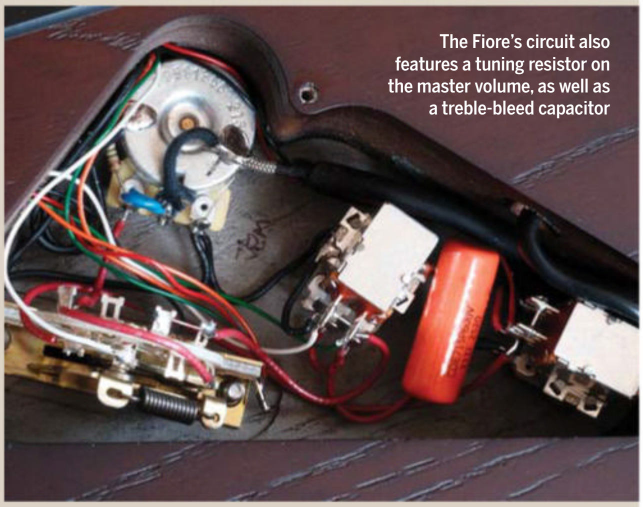
While both models here are twin-humbucking guitars with vibratos, pretty much everything else is different: the scale length, neck join, neck profiles and fretwire. The Fiore's neck feels the slimmer of the pair: 42.34mm at the nut, 21.5mm deep at the 1st fret and 23.7mm by the 12th. The DGT is marginally wider at the nut (42.6mm) but only fractionally, with pretty much the same depth at the 1st fret of 21.2mm, but it fills out considerably



UNDER THE HOOD Different guitars, different circuits…



The DGT features tuning resistors and a treble bleed on each volume control



The Fiore's circuit also features a tuning resistor on the master volume, as well as a treble-bleed capacitor

While you could expect higher levels of tweakery when it comes to the USA guitars, the Indonesian Cor-Tek-made SE DGT has some neat mods. It uses two standard Alpha 'Made in Korea' pots for each pickup's volume control, with a switched pot for the master tone. Each volume has the PRS-standard 180pF treble-bleed capacitor along with a resistor, in parallel, running from the input lug to ground. Valued at 10mega-ohms, each resistor brings down the value that the pickup 'sees' to 476k, assuming each pot is 500k. More typically, the partial coil-split uses a 2.2k resistor on the bridge pickup and a 1.1k on the neck pickup. It means a little of the screw coil is retained for a fuller 'single-coil' sound, although it's the inner slug coils that are primarily voiced, and when both are on they're hum-cancelling.

The Fiore shows off plenty of the ongoing improvements that PRS has made recently, such as the nickel-based conductive paint, the cavity cover is copper shielded, and we see that large 600-volt .033μF Orange Drop capacitor – hard to miss! There are no resistors on the switched tone pots as here they simply change the pickup wiring from standard series to parallel, not a coil-split. Like the DGT, there's a treble-bleed capacitor (180pF), plus a tuning resistor on the master volume control with a value of 1.5-mega-ohms, which (again, assuming it's a 500k pot) would mean the pickups are seeing 375k.

Typically, there's no detail on the actual humbuckers. The DGT 'S' humbuckers are designed by PRS and made in Indonesia; the Fiore's humbuckers are all USA. While DCR gives little indication of pickup sound, the DGT's reflect a pretty classic Patent Applied For range with a slightly hotter bridge (8.56k) and pretty classic lower-wind neck (7.44k). The Fiore's slightly leaner-sounding bridge humbucker measures 8.17k, and the 8.07k measurement at the neck reflects what we hear. Both sets are potted and behave well once the volume gets turned up, too!

Although the Core DGT uses locking tuners, these are non-locking – but you can upgrade to the SE locking tuners, which are a drop-in fit

> The DGT comes across as a rootsy rock bar-room brawler, the Fiore as a smoother 'LA studio' tool

to 24.7mm by the 12th – and that's what your hand really feels. But both necks are very well shaped with what feels like a very slight 'V' in lower positions, which rounds out as you move up towards the body. The DGT's neck back is gloss; the Fiore's is satin.

Rather oddly, despite being spec'd with 0.010-gauge strings, our DGT arrived with 11s, like the Core model, which adds to the bulk, despite the shorter 635mm (25-inch) scale. Another big difference is the fretwire: while the Fiore goes with the pretty standard PRS gauge (measured at 2.57mm wide by 1.14mm high), the DGT's frets are much bigger in both width and height (2.81mm by 1.4mm).

3. Like David's USA signature, the DGT has a volume for each pickup, plus a master tone with a pull switch to change to partial single coils. Meanwhile, the all-steel 'moulded' vibrato, as PRS calls it, is used throughout the SE line – and also on the USA S2 and CE models. Here, it sits parallel to the top of the guitar in typical PRS style

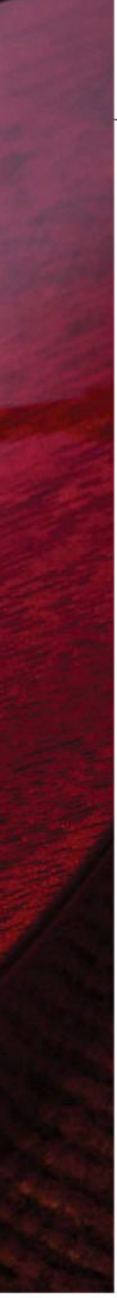
The SE DGT Standard trims a fair bit off the maple-topped version and you might prefer its earthier tones

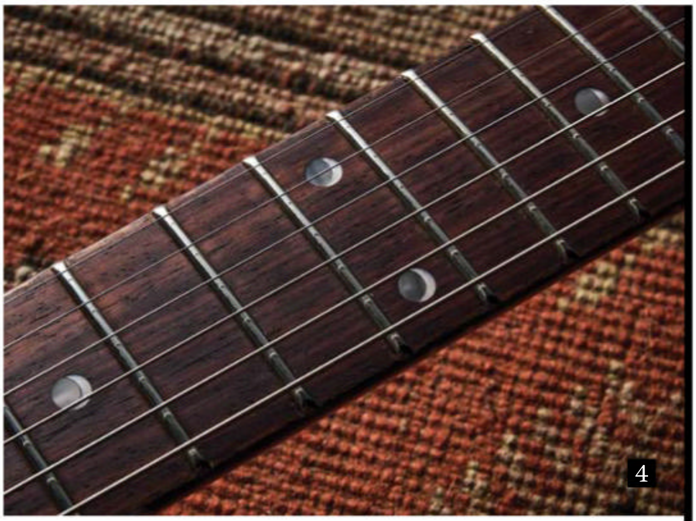
To pigeonhole the builds, there's obviously more 'Fender' to Fiore and more 'Gibson' to the SE DGT, from the percussive snap of the former to the more fundamental response of the DGT when played unplugged. That vague observation is not a million miles away from their inherent characters when we fire them up. There's not a lot of difference in output clout from either in humbucker mode, but the DGT piles on the creamy midrange, which is far from honky at the bridge; there's gutsy Les Paul-like push with just enough clarity. The neck is perfectly balanced output-wise, thicker and chewier, and there's a good sparkle with both on. Three impressive sounds.

Switching to the Fiore and it slightly pulls back the bluster and seems to clean up those lower-mids a little. And with this leaner sound, there's a touch more clarity for those of us who prefer the slightly brighter side of the tone tracks. Don't be fooled, though; it still rocks out, and the neck pickup is pretty thick and actually does a superb Santana with just a little tone roll-off.

These different characters are enhanced by the secondary sounds of both. The DGT's partial coil-splits certainly sound very single coil-y, hollowed with a percussive attack and plenty of high-end detail. Pull up the individual tones on the Fiore and the parallel humbucker sounds are in the single-coil realm, too, but a little smoother, a little steelier but extremely usable, coming across rather like a well-behaved Telecaster. These sounds really seem to love a pedalboard, too – the no-hum smooth clarity almost sounds post-produced. We might suggest that the DGT comes across as a really rootsy rock bar-room brawler, and the Fiore nods a little more to a smoother 'LA studio' tool – it's just so classy.

We mentioned the up-tilt of the Fiore's vibrato earlier on and, as ever, the DGT's bridge sits parallel to the top, producing slightly less up-bend. The Fiore's arm sits a little lower, too, while the DGT's angles up a little more. Also, the DGT uses four springs and the Fiore three, so yet again – like virtually every other feature – the vibratos are subtly different.





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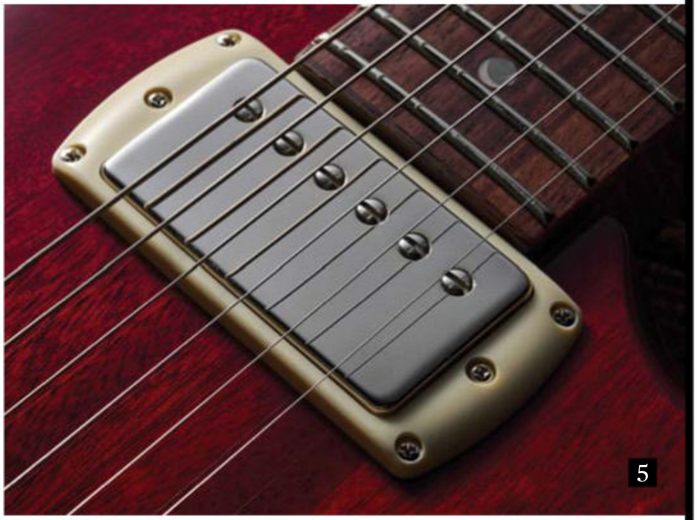


5

4. These were the original PRS inlays before birds took over! The inner curve of the 'crescent moon' matches the top curve of the headstock. The fretwire on the DGT is a lot bigger than the standard Fiore fretwire

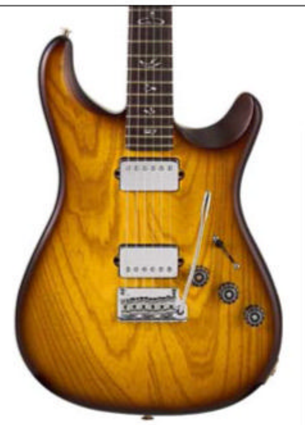
5. These new proprietary-design pickup rings now feature on quite a few SE models and surround the DGT 'S' humbuckers, the Indonesian-made versions of the USA DGT pickups

Verdict

Once upon a time, the PRS guitar came in just one flavour with an additional topping of curly maple and a sprinkling of birds if you fancied. Today? Well, we've honestly lost count of the number of new models we've seen this year alone, and in terms of style and price point the PRS range has choice aplenty and then some.

Our two signature additions here illustrate that breadth: very different guitars with zero bling and very different price points. While the higher-tier Core guitars are now in what many of us would consider 'Custom Shop' territory in terms of cost, this Fiore is priced more like a USA-production Fender. It might be less classic PRS in style, but not so in build and detail: it's superbly done with sounds and feel to match.

The SE DGT Standard not only trims a fair bit off the maple-topped version, but plenty might prefer its earthier tones, and there's nothing cut-price in the build. It's also a guitar you could happily upgrade with some success as the 'chassis' here is so good. Inspiring guitars from inspiring players. **G**



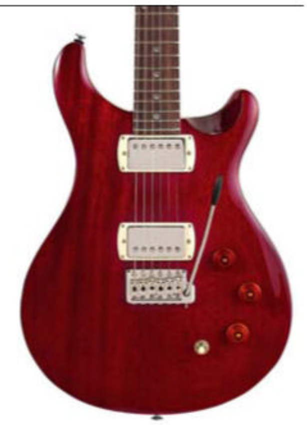
PRS FIORE HH SATIN

PRICE: £2,599 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Swamp ash
NECK: Maple (3-piece), Fiore profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.34mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, outline bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: PRS-designed 2-post steel block vibrato, PRS-designed vintage-style locking tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Fiore-H humbuckers, 3-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone 1 (neck), tone 2 (bridge) each w/ series/parallel pull switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.2/7.04
OPTIONS: The same Fiore HH is also available in Amaryllis, Pearl White, Sugar Moon, Sunflower gloss colours at £2,699
RANGE OPTIONS: The original HSS Fiore is also available in satin and gloss colours at £2,499 and £2,699 respectively
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Sunflower (as reviewed), Black Hyacinth, Metallic Midnight, Red Apple Metallic – satin nitro body and neck back

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Excellent clean, detailed build; great neck shape and playability; wide stylistic range from humbuckers; very usable hum-cancelling parallel sounds; satin and gloss colours

CONS The HH super-S styles are pretty niche



PRS SE DGT STANDARD

PRICE: £779 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Double-cutaway, carved-top solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany with 'shallow violin' carved top
NECK: Mahogany, DGT profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42.6mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 'moon' inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 22, jumbo
HARDWARE: PRS Patented vibrato (cast), PRS designed enclosed tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: PRS DGT 'S' Treble and Bass covered humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual volume controls and master tone with simultaneous coil-split pull-switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.37/7.4
OPTIONS: SE DGT (w/ maple top but otherwise same specs) comes in McCarty Tobacco Sunburst (w/ bird inlays, £899) or Gold Top (w/ moon inlays, £849)
RANGE OPTIONS: In the USA Core line-up the DGT is available in 3 levels: moon inlays with non-10 top (£4,440); bird inlays with non-10 top (£4,645); and bird inlays with 10-top and hybrid hardware (£5,445)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Vintage Cherry (as reviewed), McCarty Tobacco Burst – all high gloss

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Sharp build that punches above its price; excellent shaped 'big' neck; jumbo frets and slinky playability; dual volumes; wide range of classic rock sounds with credible single-coil splits

CONS Limited colours; will it get lost in the increasingly large SE range?

Cheap Tricks

The UK-based Vintage brand enters the pedal market with a baker's dozen of budget-friendly models

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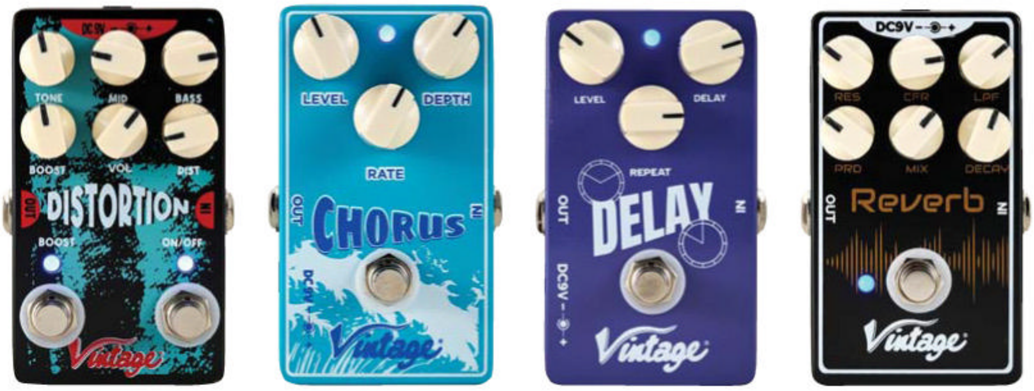
Words Trevor Curwen **Photography** Matt Lincoln



VINTAGE DISTORTION, CHORUS, DELAY & REVERB FROM £44

CONTACT **John Hornby Skewes** PHONE **01132 865381** WEB **www.vintageguitarsrus.com**

What You Need To Know

1 Vintage? I thought they just made guitars...
Well, yes, that's what the company is known for – but it also has a range of amps and accessories and has now entered the pedal market with a batch of 13 stompboxes.

2 So, why 13?
Good question... It could have been a 15-strong collection if Vintage had added a compressor and phaser, but as it stands there's a full complement of other pedalboard staples, plus three amp-in-a-box pedals.

3 Will these run off batteries?
No, they all run from a standard nine-volt adaptor, which is not included. However, you can pick up the nicely compact VPS09 power supply (£39), which offers four nine-volt 500mA outputs, plus a USB-C output.

Leeds-based musical instrument distributor John Hornby Skewes & Company created the Vintage brand back in 1993 as a source of decent-quality but affordable guitars. Now we have the brand's first foray into effects pedals with the "13 voices of Vintage", which also has a power supply available to buy separately.

There's a broad selection on offer here. Three of the pedals are in the amp-in-a-box genre – the Commander offering Marshall flavour, the American Pie doing the Fender thing, and the Maytone channelling Vox AC-30 tones. These three are six-knob pedals with three-band EQ and control over voicing as well as Level and Drive.

Besides these, the basic food groups of dirt are represented by the Overdrive, Transparent Overdrive, Distortion and Americana Fuzz pedals. As a useful complement to any of those, there's also the Equalizer 6-Band EQ pedal with a +/- 18dB range for each band offering transformative tonal shifts and possible boosts if you need it.

Modulation is covered by the Chorus, Flanger and Tremolo pedals, while the Delay and Reverb options complete the line-up. The Chinese-made pedals appear to be solidly put together and feature colourful graphics. They run from a nine-volt supply and there is no provision for battery power.

We don't have the space for a full review of all 13 pedals, so we've taken a different approach by selecting four pedals together with the VPS09 power supply to create a practical pedalboard that costs less than that of a single boutique pedal. Okay, we are talking £244.95 to be exact, but we can think of plenty of single pedals that cost way more than that.

So, what should be on a simple practical pedalboard? Well, a dirt pedal, modulation pedal, delay and reverb would be the most obvious choices, but everyone will have their own personal take on that.

The power supply has four fully isolated outputs – one for each pedal we've chosen here – but besides individual pedal cables, it also comes with a daisy-chain cable that could run several pedals from one of the outputs. And considering that each output can supply up to 500mA, there's plenty of juice for that.

1. The Reverb's knobs are neatly abbreviated as RES (Resonance), CFR (Centre Frequency), LPF (Low Pass Filter) and PRD (Pre-delay), with Mix and Decay written in full

2. The VPS09 Power Supply is nicely compact, making it an easy fit for any pedalboard. It runs from its own 18-volt power adaptor and offers four nine-volt pedal outputs each delivering 500mA, plus a five-volt USB-C outlet

1
DC9V
RES
CFR
LPF
MIX
DECAY
PRD
Reverb
IN

2
Vintage
POWER
ISOLATED POWER SUPPLY
18V IN
5V
DC9V
DC9V
DC9V
DC9V

LEVEL
DEPTH
RATE

The Rate and Depth knobs of the Chorus pedal are pretty much standard issue with any chorus, but this one also sports a Level knob that offers a degree of control over the wet/dry aspect of the effect, building in extra subtlety in the adjustments

DELAY
REPEAT
OUT
DC9V

For many, the preferred point of entry for the nine-volt power cable is at the top end of the pedal, which is what you get with both the six-knob pedals. The two three-knob pedals position the power socket on the left-hand side adjacent to the audio output

In Use

Discounting the three pedals that are based on amps that could also surely do the job, there's a choice of two overdrives, plus distortion and fuzz pedals here. While overdrive might be the preferred choice for a range of musical styles (particularly with a couple stacked together), and the fuzz could satisfy any Hendrix cravings, we've gone for the Distortion because it's the only pedal in the range that has twin footswitches – a footswitchable boost to be stacked with distortion, adding flexibility.

The pedal can give you what some may consider to be an overdrive sound with its Distortion knob at zero, but any further movement of it will get you straight into thick distortion, rich with harmonics. A three-band EQ tempers all of this with a Tone knob handling treble, alongside a Bass knob and a very potent Mid knob for hollowing things out or poking honky presence through. You'll need to set these carefully to get more traditional tones as there are some noticeable shifts here, and switching the boost in can get extreme – it adds spiky treble as you advance the dial. While it's probably not a pedal that a blues player would embrace, it has a hooligan element that may win it admirers.

THE RIVALS

In a similar price bracket to the Vintage series, for distortion needs there's the TC Electronic Dark Matter (£49), but a little more outlay gets you the classic Boss DS-1 (£75) or the DOD Gunslinger(£79). For chorus, check out the Mooer Ensemble King (£49), a micro pedal with the same three-knob control; for less outlay there's the TC Electronic Afterglow (£35). A similar delay is the TC Electronic Bucket Brigade Analog Delay (£50), which also has modulation, while the Vintage Reverb has plenty in common with the Caline Snake Bite (£45), and the Fender Hammertone (£79) has Hall, Room and Plate reverbs, and just three knobs for easy operation.

> It's a no-brainer having a delay on your 'board and this one can cover all likely contingencies

There's no phaser in the range, but you do have three other distinct modulation flavours available and our choice is the Chorus pedal, described as being "based on a classic 1970s analogue circuit". We suspect this may be referring to a Boss CE-2 (it's a similar colour), something borne out in an A/B test with our CE-2 as the new pedal offered a similar flavour.

Besides the obligatory Rate and Depth knobs, this pedal sports a Level knob that might be better labelled as 'Intensity'. While it mixes effect with dry sound, it doesn't run from completely dry to completely wet, though it does add a useful extra degree of control in dialling the chorusing to your taste and getting close to vibrato at its extreme.

It's a bit of a no-brainer having a delay pedal on your 'board, whether you're using it for a basic slapback or a longer delay, and this one can cover just about all the likely contingencies with its maximum delay time of 600ms. It's an analogue BBD delay that's easy to dial in, with a repeats trail that blends naturally with guitar tone – it's good to know that it can easily hold its own alongside classic vintage units and more expensive offerings.

Conventionally, coming at the end of this particular chain is reverb. The pedal offers six knobs, albeit perhaps not adjusting the usual set of parameters you'd expect. Mix and Decay set the amount of reverb in relation to the dry sound and the length of the reverb tail respectively, but the basic nature of the reverb is set by a Resonance knob. This pretty much simulates room damping – turn it up for the sense of a bigger, splashier room – and you can combine it with the Pre-Delay knob that sets the size of the delay before the main body of the reverb comes in.

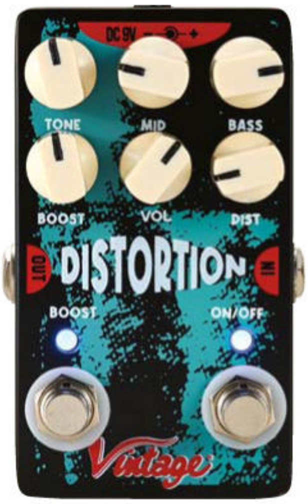
EQ comes as a centre frequency knob that effectively offers broad tonal shifts, and a low-pass filter that adjusts low-end warmth in the signal. This is solid workmanlike 'verb that will do the traditional job of putting a sense of space around your sound, but it can also deliver deeper atmospheric ambiences.

Verdict

We welcome the fact that Vintage has expanded its scope with this set of pedals and is offering a variety of tonal options for not much outlay, plus a very practical compact power supply that will work with a variety of manufacturers' pedals. The simplicity and classic BBD sound of the delay won the day out of the four that we tested, but the other three could all do a job for you without breaking the bank.

OUT
DISTORTION
VOL
DIST
BOOST
IN
ON/OFF
Vintage

The Distortion pedal has an on/off switch to the right and a Boost switch to the left, both with blue LEDs. You can have the boost already set to active when you turn the distortion on


DC 9V
TONE
MID
BASS
BOOST
VOL
DIST
OUT
DISTORTION
IN
BOOST
ON/OFF
Vintage

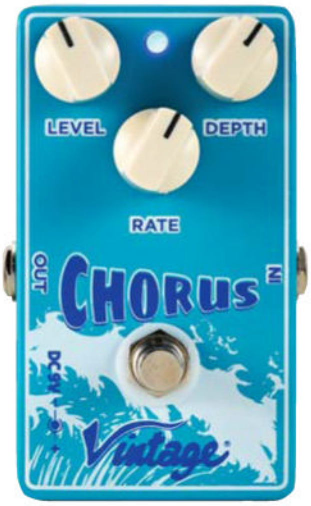
VINTAGE DISTORTION

PRICE: £49
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Distortion and boost pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Tone, Mid, Bass, Boost, Volume, Distortion, Boost footswitch, bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)
DIMENSIONS: 68 (w) x 113 (d) x 48mm (h)

8/10

PROS Compact; affordable; rich distortion; footswitched boost

CONS Boost can add treble that may be unwanted


LEVEL
DEPTH
RATE
OUT
CHORUS
IN
DC9V
Vintage

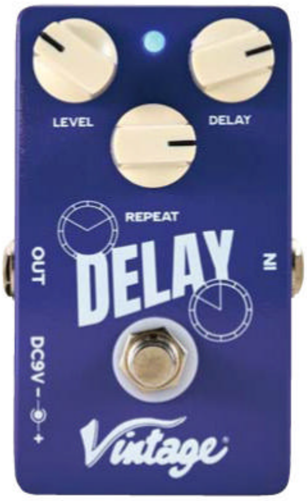
VINTAGE CHORUS

PRICE: £49
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Chorus pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Level, Rate, Depth, bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)
DIMENSIONS: 68 (w) x 113 (d) x 48mm (h)

8/10

PROS Compact; affordable; classic chorus sounds; Level adds flexibility

CONS The Level knob could be better implemented


LEVEL
DELAY
REPEAT
OUT
DELAY
IN
DC9V
Vintage

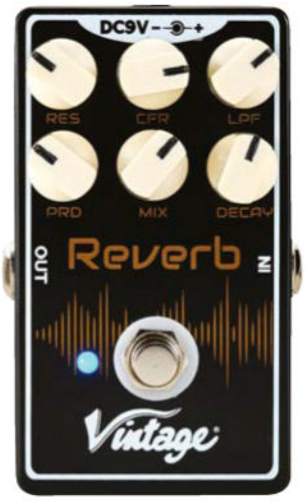
VINTAGE DELAY

PRICE: £44
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Delay pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: Level, Delay, Repeat, bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)
DIMENSIONS: 68 (w) x 113 (d) x 48mm (h)

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Compact; affordable; vintage BBD sound; simple operation

CONS Nothing really, especially at this price point


DC9V
RES
CFR
LPF
PRD
MIX
DECAY
OUT
Reverb
IN
Vintage

VINTAGE REVERB

PRICE: £59
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Reverb pedal
FEATURES: True bypass
CONTROLS: RES, CFR, LPF, PRD (pre-delay), Mix, Decay, bypass footswitch
CONNECTIONS: Standard input, standard output
POWER: 9V DC adaptor (not supplied)
DIMENSIONS: 68 (w) x 113 (d) x 48mm (h)

8/10

PROS Compact; affordable; wide range of reverb available

CONS Parameter adjustment isn't over-intuitive

Guitarist

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« BLUEPRINT »

CONTROL SHIFT

The XS-100 and XS-1 pitch shifters set out to give modern players dominion over the wildest effect on the pedalboard. Boss's Matt Knight tells us more

Words Henry Yates **Photography** Phil Barker

One minute, it's a car alarm. The next, it's a chewed-up cassette tape. And perhaps it's that infinite capacity for metamorphosis – under the boots of players from Tom Morello to Jonny Greenwood – that has made the pitch shifter a pedalboard staple since the 70s.

Needless to say, Boss is no newcomer to the market. The king of compacts released its first analogue pitch effects – the OC-2 Octaver and VB-2 Vibrato – in the early 80s, before going digital with 1987's PS-2 Pitch Shifter/Delay, and pretty much setting the pace for the modern sector with 2010's PS-6 Harmonist.

But as global product marketing manager, Matt Knight, reflects, it still felt like there was more gas in the tank. And with the new XS-100 and XS-1 Poly Shifters – a pair of hugely expressive, envelope-pushing units dressed in sky-blue armour – the Japanese pioneer set out to deliver no less than the next generation of shifting.

What made Boss designers believe that pitch shifting could go further?

"Boss has a 40-year history with pitch shifting products. But we haven't had a new device since the PS-6 in 2010. And, you know, how much has changed in music over the past 15 years? We've seen other innovations in that world, in terms of multi-effects, plug-ins, other hardware. So with our history and our vision of always asking, 'What's the best thing we can make for musicians now?', we knew there was still life in this category."

Matt Knight, Boss global product marketing manager

PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT KNIGHT

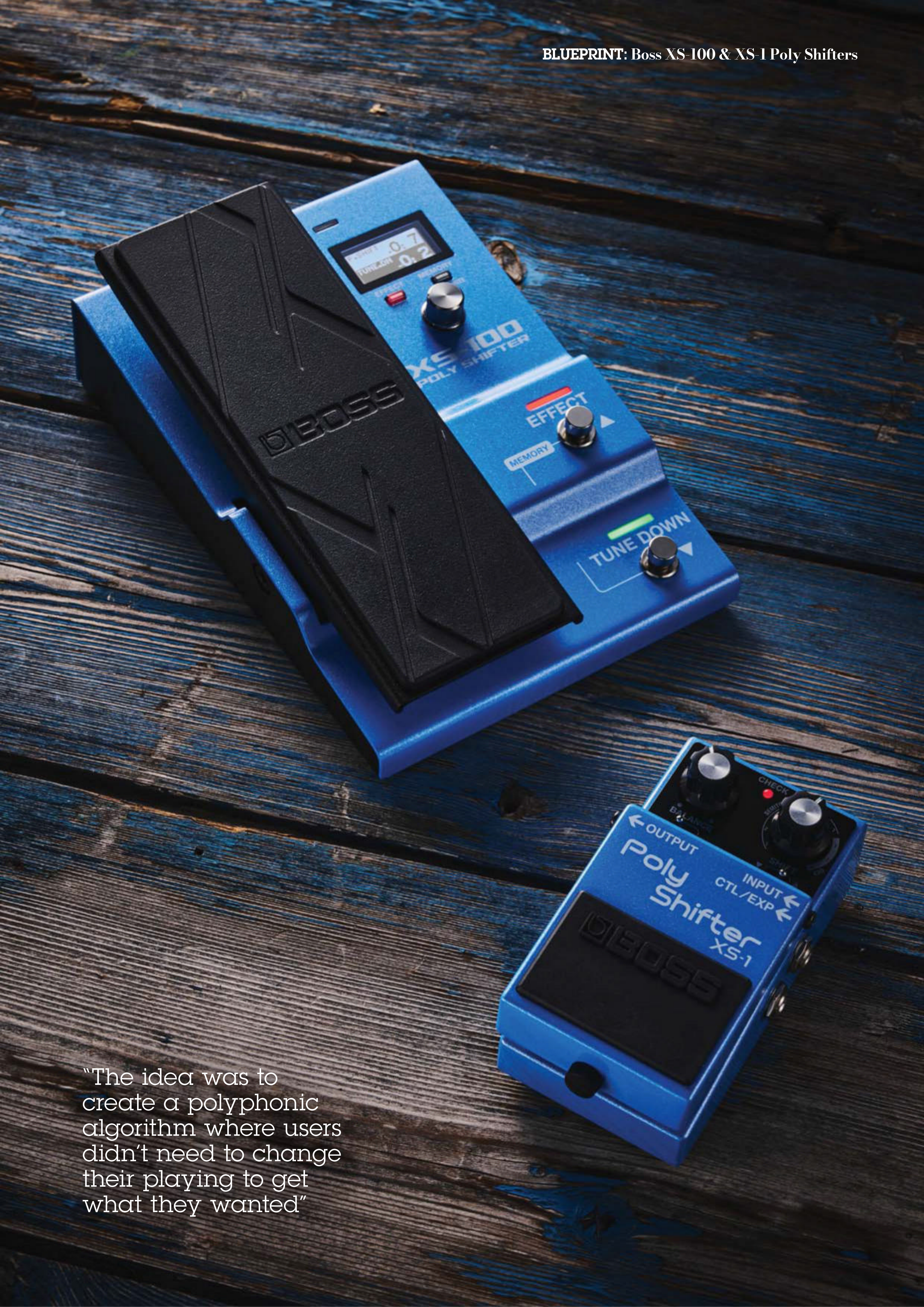
What were the roots of the XS series?

"This project actually started back in the mid-2010s, with a PC-based development idea. Our engineers were asking: 'What can we do for pitch shifting in a computer realm?' And it was quite easy to do high-speed processing on a PC but really difficult progressing that into a stompbox. So 15 years of background has developed into the XS series. I'm actually glad it took so long because we ended up with such a great product."

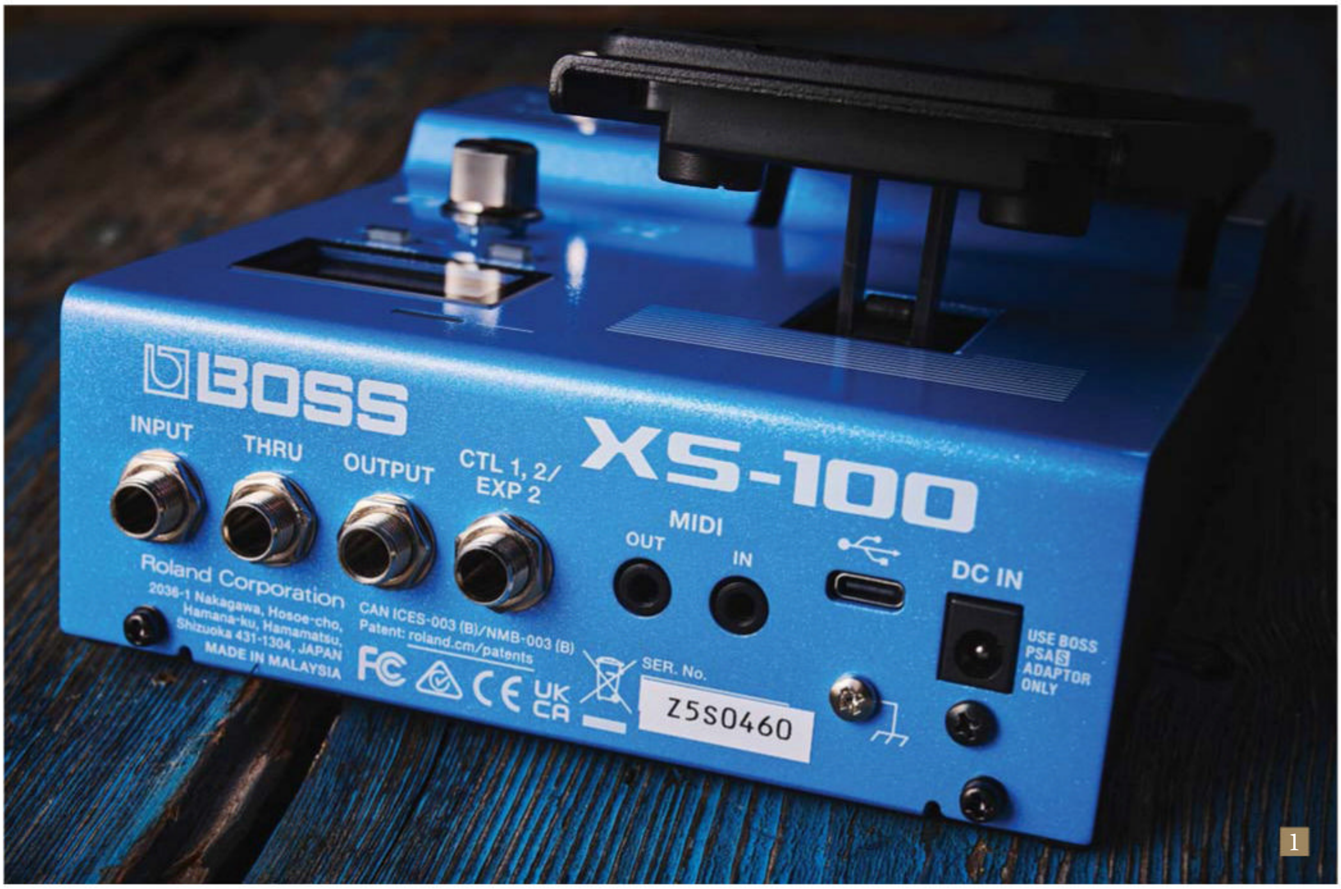
What would you say is at the heart of the XS series pedals?

"The XS algorithm is where the revolution comes from. First and foremost, we knew it had to be polyphonic. Of course, there are other polyphonic products on the market, but the idea was to create a polyphonic algorithm where users didn't need to change their playing to get what they wanted out of it. And, actually, one of the things we realised during development was the possibility of using SHARC processing chips because of their processing power and power efficiency.

"We took out any glitches, any hiccups, and just give you pure attack clarity and character. So the XS pedals feel like an extension of your playing, rather than an effect on top of what you're doing. So if you want to go half a step down, it really feels like you're playing half a step down; it doesn't feel like you've added an effect to do that. I found the oddest thing was turning it off after jamming a tone down – and suddenly the natural tuning feels like you've retuned the instrument."


XS-100
POLY SHIFTER
EFFECT
MEMORY
TUNE DOWN
BOSS
OUTPUT
Poly Shifter
XS-1
INPUT
CTL/EXP
CHECK
BALANCE

"The idea was to create a polyphonic algorithm where users didn't need to change their playing to get what they wanted"


BOSS
XS-100
INPUT
THRU
OUTPUT
CTL 1, 2/ EXP 2
MIDI
OUT
IN
DC IN
USE BOSS PSA ADAPTOR ONLY
Roland Corporation
2036-1 Nakagawa, Hosoe-cho, Hamana-ku, Hamamatsu, Shizuoka 431-1304, JAPAN
MADE IN MALAYSIA
CAN ICES-003 (B)/NMB-003 (B)
Patent: roland.cm/patents
SER. No.
Z5S0460

1

The XS-100 offers an impressive shifting range, doesn't it?

"Yeah, it's four octaves up or down. Some people would argue that's too much. We'd argue that we look forward to what people could do with it. All of the famous players that have used pitch shifters created their sound from what that product offered them at the time. So that freedom of range just means something new might be born out of it.

"And that's always the great thing about bringing a product to market – actually seeing what people do with it. The maddest sound I've got myself is probably going down a 5th, then adding in dry signal for harmonies, then pitch shifting on top. But I've seen people on Instagram almost use the XS-100 like a wah pedal because the expression pedal is so responsive and you can actually dial the feel into your playing as well. And then we've also added a toe switch so you can program it to have four different pitches on hand at any one time."

It's claimed that the XS units raise the bar for lead guitar playing.

"100 per cent. Improving that attack and feel just means that whether you do fast runs, legato, really dissonant notes, it just works really well. I've spoken to a few people who were, like, 'I tried to trick it, I tried to break it, I tried to give it really odd things to work out – but it just works.' They never had to think: 'What do I need to do from a lead-guitar perspective to match the pedal?' They could just do what they wanted and the pedal would follow along. You know, it doesn't feel like you're losing any connection, from your pick to the string to the effect to your amplifier."

> "That freedom of range [of the eight-octave XS-100] just means something new might be born out of it"

How flexible are the XS sounds?

"We didn't want to limit people. So there's presets onboard, but you can really dial in every sound. You can go between any range of octaves, or between a semitone down and a semitone up – then save that as a memory. You can flick through those memories really quickly as well. I've already seen some people going up and down through their memories to create riffs.

"We wanted a product that effectively gave complete creative freedom, not locked it down. But not everyone is going to do wild, crazy stuff with it. Some people might just go, 'I need to play in E♭ and I'm not going to have a guitar specifically for that.' Or, 'I'm in a covers band and I need to do something in drop D, drop C, or even with a capo.' It's open for you to do what you want."

How hard did Boss work to make the XS units intuitive?

"I think, like any of our compacts, a pitch shifter needs to be super easy to use. So with XS-1, we basically added one big knob that determines where the pitch is, then one controlling how much effect you want – wet to dry – and on/off. With XS-100, we said, 'Yes, we need all of those minor tweaks to really dial in the sound. But ultimately, you need to be able to get a product out of the box, plug it in and enjoy it.' So we knew we couldn't lock things behind lots of menus. Then there's the fact that on the XS-100, you have a toe switch, so you can engage it like a wah pedal. That was one of the first things I said, like, 'I want to turn it on like a wah because I'm used to clicking my wah in. Why can't I click my pitch shifter in…?'"

It's said that you can still hear the raw tone of your guitar, even through the effect?

"There was a conversation: how does it feel under the fingers? What's the attack like? What's the note clarity like?

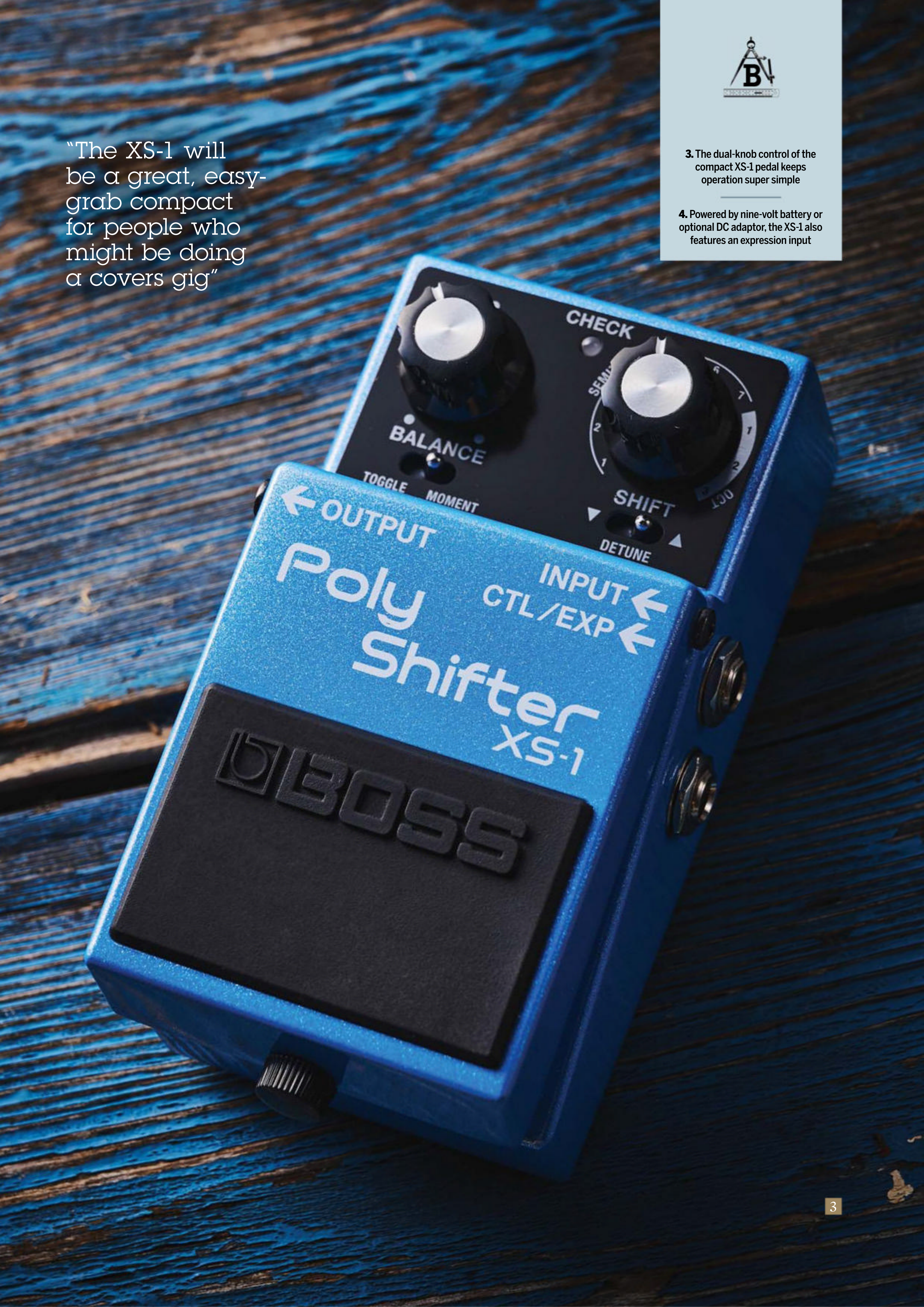
1. The flagship XS-100 offers a massive shifting range of four octaves up or down

2. The rubber-capped expression pedal allows you to engage the XS-100 like a wah

BOSS
XS-100
POLY SHIFTER
P.0: 5
T.0: 2
04
EFFECT
MEMORY
HOLD: WRITE
MEMORY
EFFECT
TUNE DOWN

"Our work on the algorithm maintain[s] the attack character and tonal clarity [of your guitar]"

> “The XS-1 will be a great, easy-grab compact for people who might be doing a covers gig”


CHECK
BALANCE
TOGGLE
MOMENT
SEMI
SHIFT
DETUNE
OUTPUT
INPUT
CTL/EXP
Poly Shifter
XS-1
BOSS

3. The dual-knob control of the compact XS-1 pedal keeps operation super simple

4. Powered by nine-volt battery or optional DC adaptor, the XS-1 also features an expression input

How do I still feel like I'm playing the guitar that I've spent all this money on? If you're plugging in a Les Paul, you still want it to sound like that guitar, and so much of that comes down to our work on the algorithm to maintain that attack character and tonal clarity. Without that, every instrument could be at risk of sounding similar because you're running it through a device that's changing its core tone."

How much scope for connectivity is there with the XS pedals?
"So, just to talk about XS-1 for a second. As a compact, we've added that expression input, so if you wanted to use XS-1 as an expression device, you could. But with XS-100, again, our goal was complete freedom. Believe it or not, XS-100 is a full MIDI controller in its own right. So there's potential for MIDI sequencing and changing pitches remotely.

"It's mad, the amount of connections they ended up putting on. Because, actually, on the back of the XS-100, you have inputs for a separate control switch or expression pedal. So if you wanted to add a second expression pedal or second set of footswitches, the option is there. I'd imagine we will start to see it as a section of people's bigger rigs – who knows what someone might come up with?"

> "The XS pedals feel like an extension of your playing, rather than an effect on top of what you're doing"

Were there challenges along the way?
"We weren't going to revolutionise the way a Boss compact looked. With XS-100, the hardware was developed pretty quickly, too. It was the software and feature set that took the longest time to dial in. Lots of comparisons, lots of testing, lots of back and forth, lots of very deep analysis at an engineer level. It went through a lot of revisions, almost weekly. Constantly changing, testing and really trying to put it through its paces to make sure, again, that we've achieved that core goal. Once people plug it in, I think they'll really start to feel that."

Do you have a user in mind for the XS-100 and XS-1?
"I think Boss compacts appeal to such a huge range of players, it's impossible to put it in a box. But I think, ultimately, XS-1 will be a great, easy-grab compact for people who might be doing a covers gig and they need to do something with a capo one moment, then drop a step down, or maybe use a range of different tunings.

"To me, it feels like XS-100 will gravitate towards people who are trying to experiment with their sound – you know, not as mad as a synth pedal but more creative than a chorus or a phaser. You can really make something brand-new in terms of a riff or a style or a sound. I'd love to sit here in two or three decades' time and look at some of the people that have made hit records with our product. That would be amazing."

Let's say there's someone reading this who last used a pitch shifter back in the 90s. Would you encourage them to have a listen to how things have developed?
"Absolutely. Going back to the first question: is there still juice in the tank? Absolutely. What I would say is, 'Pick up the XS pedals with no preconceptions of what it will sound like.' Just going through the presets, to me, was eye-opening in terms of the riffs and ideas I could get out of it. And then you need to look at what people have done on the socials. You just think, 'There's so much more out there.' So I would certainly urge people to come back and give it a go." G

www.boss.info

KEITH URBAN

The country superstar shares his love for Dumbles, writing riffs on cheap guitars, and the Nocaster once owned by Cinderella's Tom Keifer that's "worth every cent"

What was the first serious guitar you bought with your own money?

"I guess, to me, they're all serious! That's all relative because my first guitar was an Ibanez copy, and it was 146 bucks. At the time, because I was nine years old, that was way more money than I had, so that was serious [laughs]. Aside from that, the first one that comes to mind would be a 1982 Fender Strat in Candy Apple Red. It was the actual 'STRAT' model that they made for a short period; I bought that when I was 15, and it was close to $1,000, which was massive money for me at the time."

What was the last guitar you bought, and why?

"I haven't bought one in a while, but I bought a 1972 Fender Mustang bass, so it wasn't a guitar but a bass. I love playing bass as well and write quite a bit with bass guitar – and I've been known to play it on a few of my records, depending on the song."

What's the most incredible find or bargain you've ever had when buying guitars?

"Boy, that's Joe Bonamassa territory, there, isn't it? [laughs] Well, Tom Keifer from Cinderella, for some reason, sold his Nocaster. I was at Gruhn's many, many years ago. I played it, fell in love with it and bought it. Right now, I can't remember what I paid for it; it wasn't cheap. I absolutely love that guitar, so that's definitely one that I feel was worth every cent. It's just an unusually great guitar with probably, hands down, the most ferocious, dynamic pickups I've ever heard in a Telecaster. It's all original. The whole thing is original – everything, you know? Well, maybe not the frets and so forth… but the electronics, hardware and everything else. It's amazing. I don't know why Tom sold it; maybe it served its purpose in his life, like they do, and it was time for someone else to own it. I'm very grateful to have it and be its current custodian."

What's the strongest case of buyer's remorse you've ever had after buying gear?

"I haven't had buyer's remorse, but I've had missed-out remorse! I was at Carter's [Carter Vintage Guitar in Nashville] many, many years ago, and they had David Lindley's snakeskin-wrapped [Dumble] Steel String Singer, which is so iconic. I didn't buy it and I've regretted it ever since. I know where it is and it's gone through the roof in value – and it's not because of that, I just really wish I had bought that amp. I would still own it and I'm sure I'd be playing it. It's one of those funny things where common sense said to me, 'That's a lot of money to spend on an amp. Don't be doing that.' But God, I wish I'd spent the money."

> "I've got no brand loyalty, anything's up for grabs. Any guitar's got some inspiration in it"

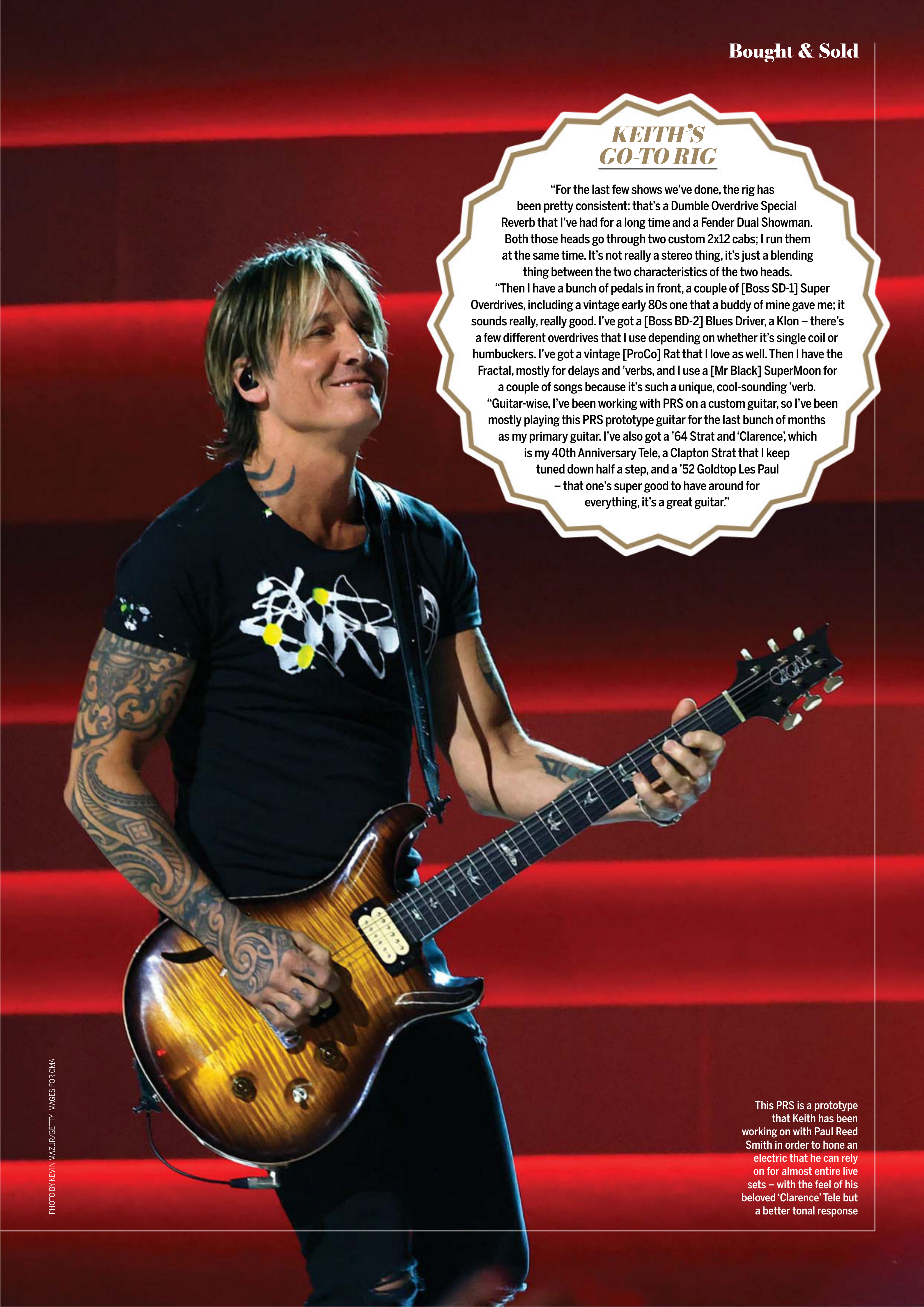
Have you ever sold a guitar that you now intensely regret letting go of?

"Yeah, for whatever reason, I had a black Squier Stratocaster through the 80s when I was playing in my cover band. It wasn't a special guitar, but I just put up a lot of miles on it and really loved it. I don't know why I sold it, I probably traded it in for something, but I wish I hadn't done that. It's because of the sentimental value for me with that guitar.

"So I haven't had that happen in a while, though I was about to sell a guitar recently and I reneged on it. I went, 'No, I don't really want to sell this one.' It was a '58 'Burst. Weirdly enough, I hadn't played it in a while. I pulled it out, played it and I'd forgotten how beautiful the neck was. It's an unusual shape for a '58 – it's not as fat as normal '58 'Bursts. It feels a little… just slightly leaner for a '58. It's not like a '59 slim, but it's

Keith has had this maple-topped 1989 Fender Custom 40th Anniversary Telecaster, fondly known as 'Clarence', since new. And while he admits that it has tonal limitations, it's still the guitar he's knows the most – and is the most comfortable with

PHOTO BY DEBRA L ROTHENBERG/WIREIMAGE/GETTY IMAGES



KEITH'S GO-TO RIG

"For the last few shows we've done, the rig has been pretty consistent: that's a Dumble Overdrive Special Reverb that I've had for a long time and a Fender Dual Showman. Both those heads go through two custom 2x12 cabs; I run them at the same time. It's not really a stereo thing, it's just a blending thing between the two characteristics of the two heads.

"Then I have a bunch of pedals in front, a couple of [Boss SD-1] Super Overdrives, including a vintage early 80s one that a buddy of mine gave me; it sounds really, really good. I've got a [Boss BD-2] Blues Driver, a Klon – there's a few different overdrives that I use depending on whether it's single coil or humbuckers. I've got a vintage [ProCo] Rat that I love as well. Then I have the Fractal, mostly for delays and 'verbs, and I use a [Mr Black] SuperMoon for a couple of songs because it's such a unique, cool-sounding 'verb.

"Guitar-wise, I've been working with PRS on a custom guitar, so I've been mostly playing this PRS prototype guitar for the last bunch of months as my primary guitar. I've also got a '64 Strat and 'Clarence', which is my 40th Anniversary Tele, a Clapton Strat that I keep tuned down half a step, and a '52 Goldtop Les Paul – that one's super good to have around for everything, it's a great guitar."

This PRS is a prototype that Keith has been working on with Paul Reed Smith in order to hone an electric that he can rely on for almost entire live sets – with the feel of his beloved 'Clarence' Tele but a better tonal response

PHOTO BY KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR CMA

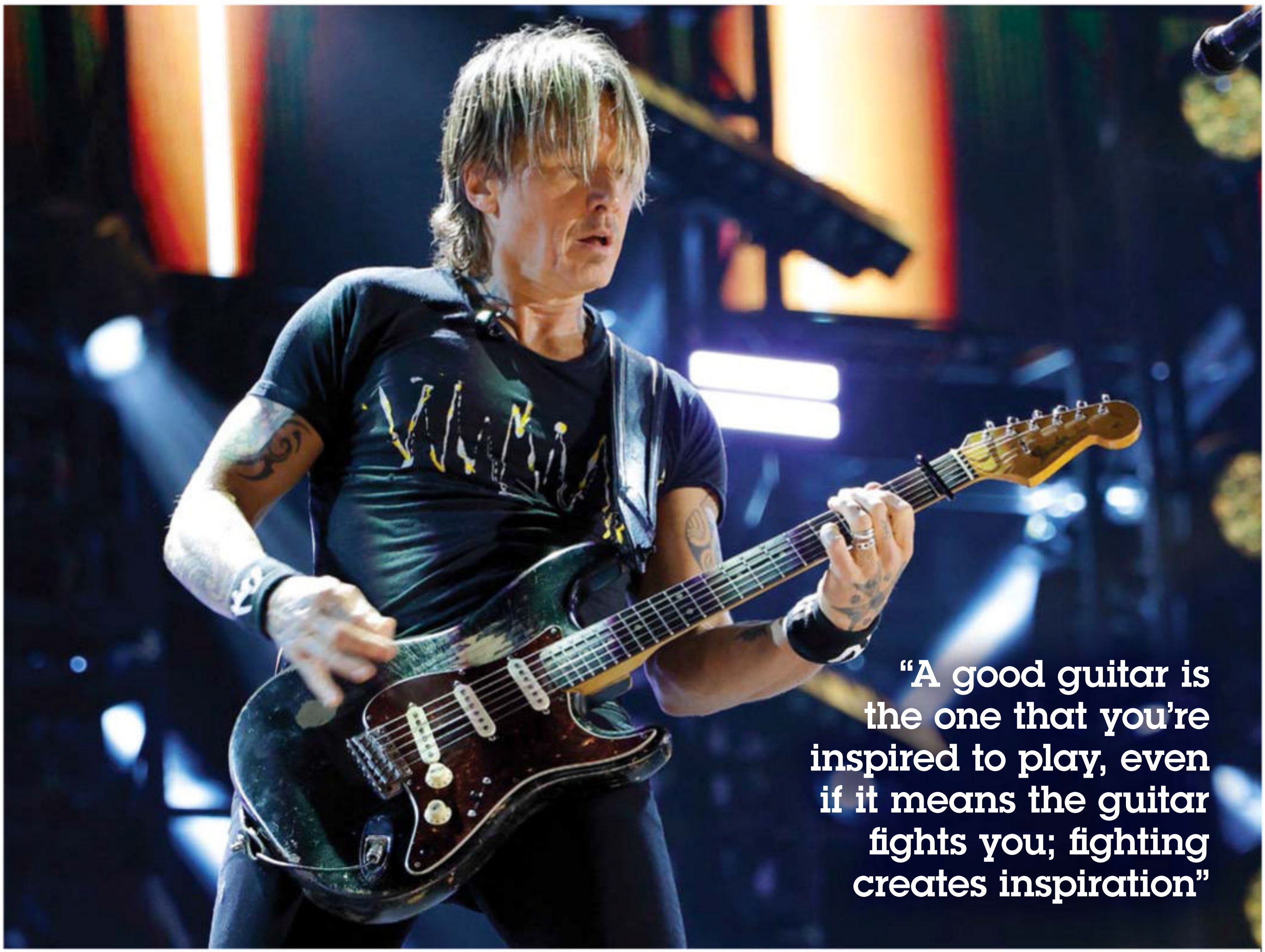


PHOTO BY JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES

"A good guitar is the one that you're inspired to play, even if it means the guitar fights you; fighting creates inspiration"

This heavily worn 1964 Stratocaster has long been a fixture in Keith's rig. He leaves a capo on the 1st fret of its thin, fast neck

not a fat '58; it sort of fits in between, which to me is like Goldilocks. It just had such a beautiful neck. I played it for about 10 minutes before I was putting it in the case to take it to the guy who was coming to buy it. I did put it back in the case, but then called the guy, and said, 'I'm so sorry, I'm not selling this.'"

What's your best buying tip for anyone looking for their ultimate guitar?

"Oh, that's a good one! Well, play it for one. Can you afford it? That's another. I don't know… I think maybe it's about bonding with something. That's all it is for me. I usually base it on if I pick it up and play it, and a riff or something comes out of the guitar that I've never played before, I get very excited about that particularly. It happens on really cheap guitars, too. I've walked into stores and found fairly cheap guitars, you know, for a couple hundred bucks, and kind of gone, 'Wow, I've never played that riff before.' Then maybe another riff comes out of it, and I go, 'This guitar's got some stuff in it.' So I've bought guitars based on that."

When was the last time you stopped and looked in a guitar shop window or browsed online, and what were you looking at?

"I haven't been to a guitar shop in a while, although I do love going. I'll just wander around looking at things that grab my eye. It can be vintage, new, solidbody, hollowbody, anything – or any brand. I've got no brand loyalty, anything's up for grabs. Any guitar's got some inspiration in it."

If forced to make a choice, would you rather buy a really good guitar and a cheap amp or a cheap guitar and a top-notch amp?

"The guitar comes first, but… Man, that's a great question. I was going to try to give an answer, and I was like, 'You don't believe that, Keith' [laughs]. Because, really, either one works. I mean, first, we have to define what 'good' means because that's such a relative thing. To me, 'good' is something that pulls something out of me that feels and sounds really good. Regardless of how much it is, what brand it is or anything about it, to me, that's a good guitar. That beats tone, even because the tone could be shitty and that's actually part of the character of the guitar you just played. It's like if Iggy and The Stooges or the MC5 played a high-quality '58 Les Paul – it wouldn't work, you know? It's all relative to what you're trying to get out of the thing. A good guitar is the one that you're inspired to play, even if it means the guitar fights you; fighting creates inspiration."

If you could only use humbuckers or single coils for the rest of your career, which would it be and why?

"Single coils. It's what I cut my teeth on. I just personally think there's more total character in a single coil. I'd rather have a low-output single coil and then just crank the amp. That would be my preference." **[AD]**

Keith Urban's latest release, *High (Deluxe)*, is available now on Hit Red Records/UMG Recordings, Inc
https://keithurban.com

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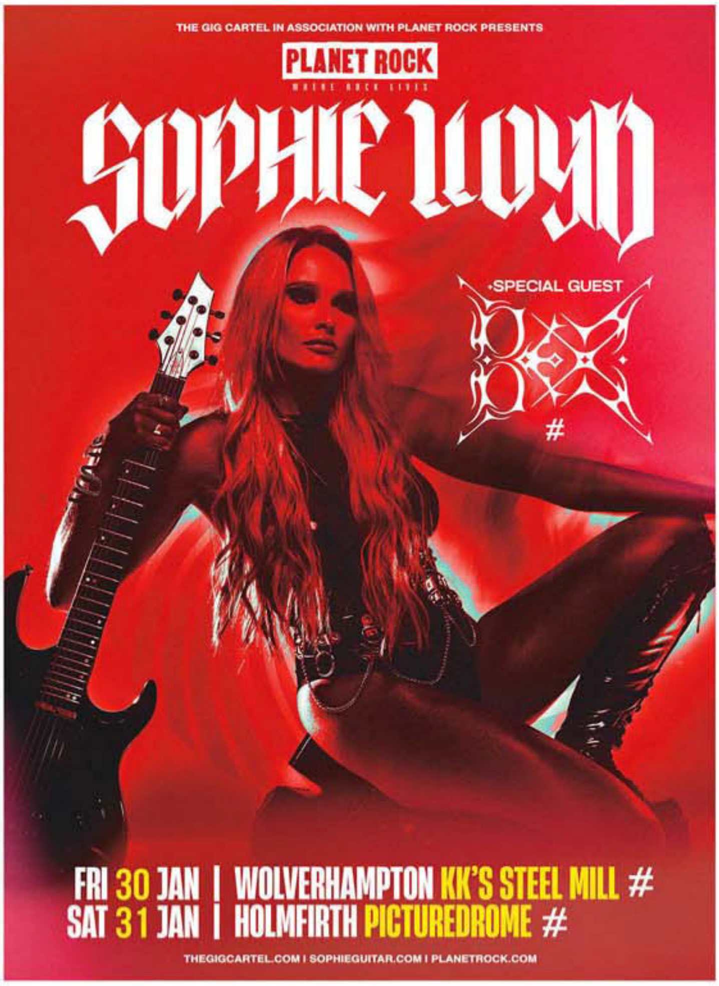

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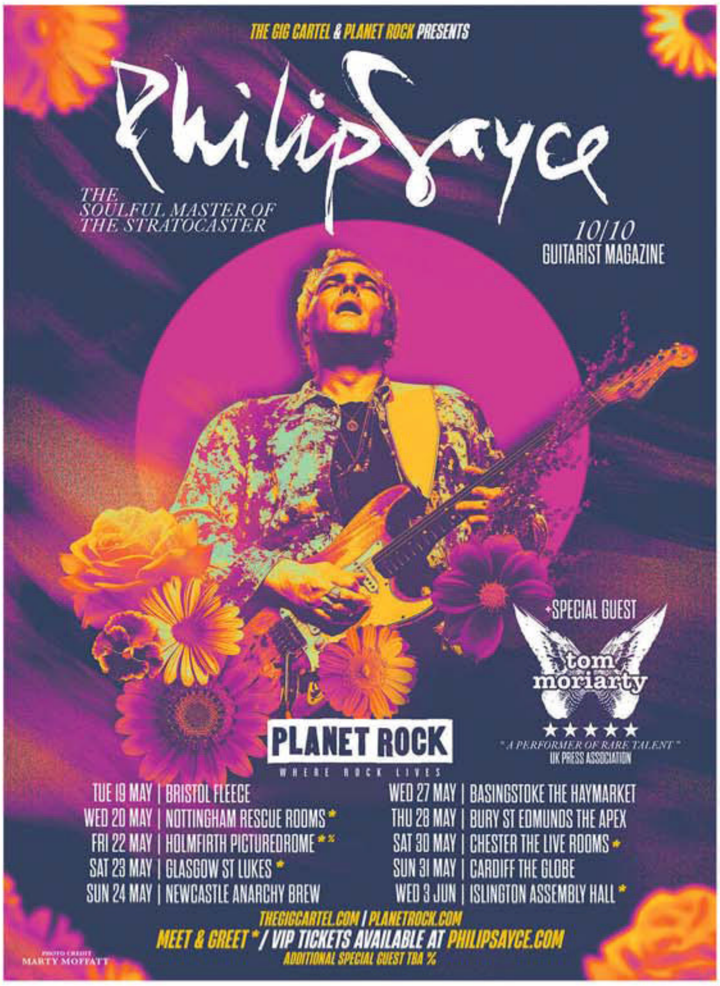

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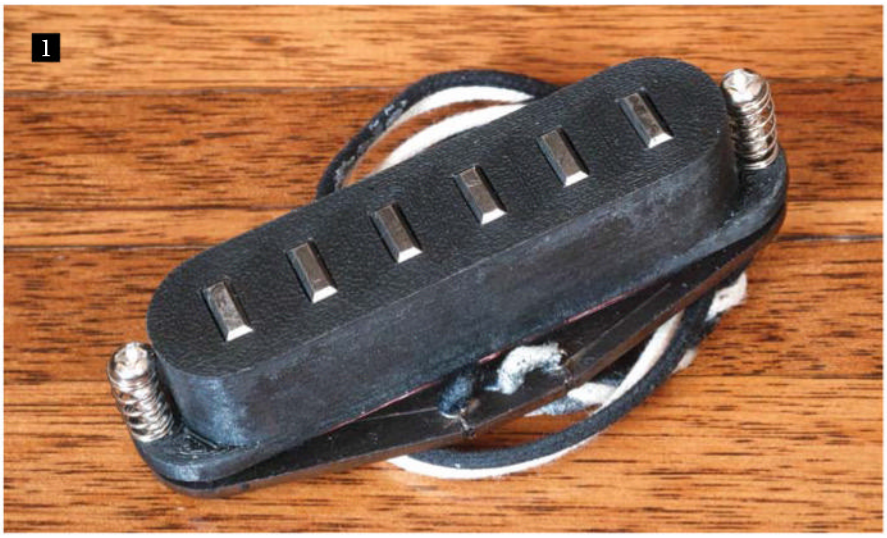
BITS 'N' PIECES

Some of the best custom builds can almost happen by chance, believes Dave Burrluck, as he attempts to turn some disparate parts into a valid guitar. What could possibly go wrong?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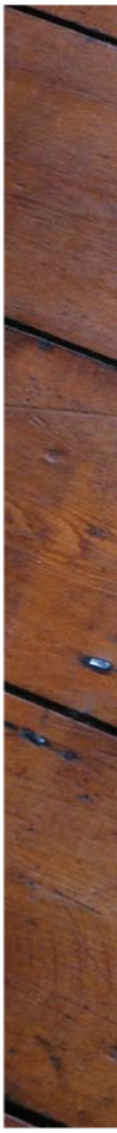


The wonderful thing about DIY domestic modding is that creating a guitar can be a bit of adventure and not necessarily follow a specific plan. It's very different from ordering up a custom guitar where all the fine details have to be decided on well in advance. No, us modders can easily change our direction, whether that's because an inspired idea seems like a big mistake the following morning, or simply that we come up with something better altogether.

In the dim, distant past at college, I was taught that every project needs a design brief: its aims and objectives, options to the main idea, not to mention the methods of creating that idea and, of course, as many sketches and drawings as you could muster. If your design brief was good, you'd earn brownie points, even if your final desk, table, chair or – in my case – guitar was less than perfect. To be honest, most of us knocked something up in the workshop first and *then* wrote our design brief. Some of us even passed the course!

Back to the present and I'm reminded of those days. I have a project to complete, to a deadline, but – not for the first time – I haven't got a plan, let alone a design brief. Where to start?

> "Creating a DIY guitar build can be a bit of adventure and us modders can easily change our direction"

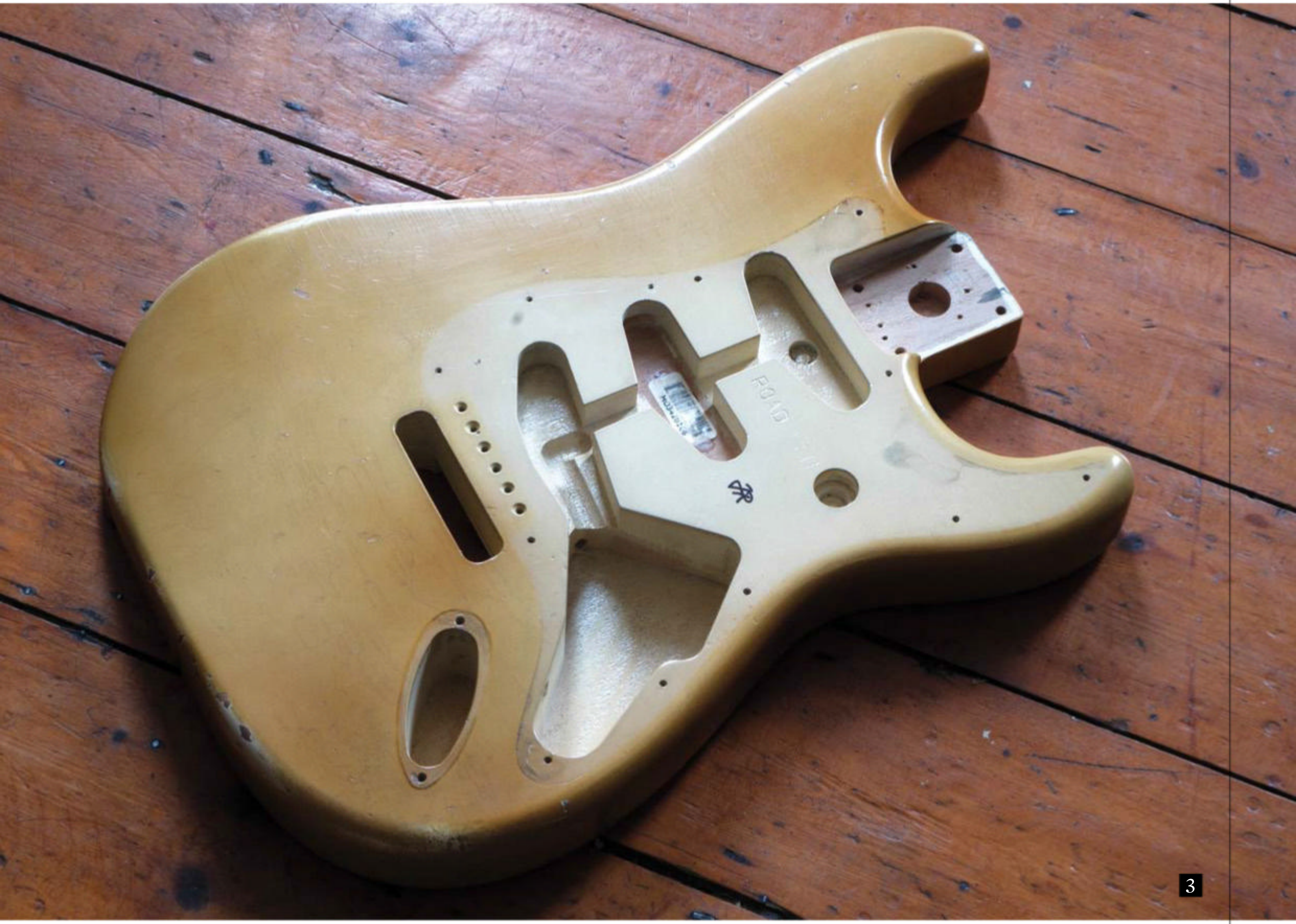
Going Green

Earlier this year Leigh Greenhough, the man behind Green Pickups, had sent The Mod Squad a staple magnet (Alnico V) Strat-size single coil. It's a bit of a rarity in my experience, but Leigh's description is quite alluring: "The aim of the Strat-sized Staple is to achieve the perfect balance of warmth, articulation and dynamic response. Designed to fit standard Stratocaster-sized single-coil routs, this pickup captures the signature clarity and punch of a staple magnet design while delivering smooth, rich tonal character." Now, that sounds like a perfect fit in the bridge position of a Strat-style parts build. It certainly ticks the 'something different' box, which is the beauty of self-builds. Could I use that to create a Staplecaster? Hmm, it's a start.

Some months ago a very good local guitar player and burgeoning vintage refinisher – Matt Withey of Jozo Reece Guitar Relics – had showed me some of his very impressive work. I had a couple of Fender bodies that were unused and donated them to his cause. Matt used one to create a very heavy relic Stratocaster-style build, while he unexpectedly refinished the other to sort of match the colour and age of my old '69 Telecaster that I had showed him – and returned it to me. It's quite a job: the body's dirty nicotine-blonde nitro-finish body looks like it could have been Keef's studio guitar for the past 50 years. At 1.81kg (4lb) in weight, the alder body should end up around 3.5kg (7.7lb) with all the bits attached, pretty much the same as my well-used Fender Road Worn Strat reference. Clearly, one pickup and an old-looking Strat body isn't quite the full picnic, but we're getting there. Next, I'll need a neck, some tuners, a bridge and some sort of scratchplate.

I had been contacted by David Hart, the marketing administrator at a venture called Guitar Anatomy – which supplies a wide range of parts, including necks and bodies – who was keen to get some exposure. After a bit of discussion, he graciously donated a paddle-head 22-fret roasted maple neck to The Mod Squad

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK



cause. Now, the roasting bit of roasted maple is a rather casual catch-all in that all it alludes to is that the maple, which we know nothing about, has been 'roasted' or 'torrified.' How? Where? No idea. It's certainly not an exclusive high-end choice and can vary considerably in colour and quality. But when the neck arrived, it was pretty impressive. The slab-sawn maple is a light caramel in colour, and the rosewood fingerboard is rather nicely striped and dark in colouration, with a 241mm (9.5-inch) radius and medium-gauge frets that measure approximately 2.65mm wide by 1.2mm high. Dimensionally, it's pretty close to that Fender Road Worn with a nut width of just over 42mm; it's a shade under 52mm at the 12th fret and 55.65mm at the neck end. Depth-wise, it's 21mm just in front of the 1st fret, filling out to 23.9mm by the 12th.

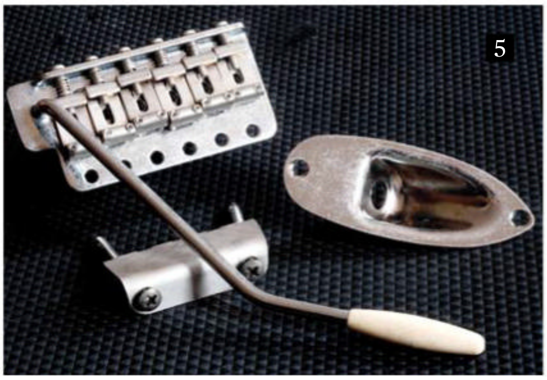
The profile feels pretty good, too – it's quite a classic 'C' – and is slightly asymmetric in the upper positions with less shoulder on the bass side. Although it's very well sanded and pretty much ready to finish, I will need to hand-cut the paddle headstock and, of course, I have the potential to reshape the profile, too.

My only slight concern is the body-end of the neck. The neck pocket in the body itself has quite a distinct curve. The GA neck's end is slightly more squared, so unless I slightly reshape it, this will mean

1. Green Pickups' single-coil Staple is tidily made and a drop-in for a Strat-style build. Let's get started!

2. A choice of paddle-head necks: the more modern Guitar Anatomy neck is the darker coloured roasted maple and modern in style; the paler neck is from a Wilkinson vintage-style kit

3. This Fender Road Worn body has been given a vintage-looking nitro makeover



4. The back of the body is just as detailed, with its wear and cracking, as the front of it

5. This Gotoh vibrato and jack plate look far from new and should suit the aged body finish perfectly

6. These Guitar Anatomy rear-locking tuners are well priced. As a backup, I have a set of non-locking Gotoh tuners. Choices are good

6
GA
GUITAR ANATOMY

the neck actually sits a fraction further north and, subsequently, the bridge saddles will have to do the same. A spare Wilkinson 21-fret vintage-style kit neck has exactly the correct curve at the neck end but also follows vintage protocol with a smaller 184mm (7.25-inch) radius and smaller frets. Personally, I prefer the more 'modern' GA neck, not least with its bigger frets, but at least I have a backup plan. There's a first.

Hardware Choice

Sensing that this developing build might head in a more experimental direction, I decide to go vintage with the hardware, then I can upgrade and tweak/improve along the way. We can all get bamboozled with choice when it comes to hardware, especially for a Stratocaster-style build. Although The Mod Squad has no affiliation with Gotoh, they're my go-to (sorry!) brand personally, and have been for a number of years. Why? Quality, consistency and cost. A quick order to Armstrong Music and £150 later (yes, we graciously get a trade discount – it all helps!) and some Gotoh parts are on their way (a GE101TS Relic vibrato, a NBS-3 Aged-C neckplate and screws, and a lightly aged jack-socket cup), as well as a set of vintage-style split-post tuners with a set of larger bushings if I decide to mount them on the modern holed GA neck.

In addition to that neck, Guitar Anatomy also has a big selection of parts with its own branding, plus perennials like Wilkinson. David was also quite keen for me to try some of the company's well-priced vintage-style rear-locking tuners; they're worth a try and if I'm not happy, I have those Gotohs that I can swap in. Two backups in one project? Unheard of!

I still haven't finalised the other pickups, scratchplate or the circuit, but that shouldn't be too difficult to sort, although part of me wants to give the Green Staple single coil pride of place… the germ of an idea that started this potential build. But first things first: I need to get the neck onto the body, load up the tuners and vibrato, and see where we are. I'll let you know next issue. **G**

For more information, head to the following sites: Green Pickups (www.greenpickups.com), vintage refinishing by Jozo Reece Guitar Relics (www.instagram.com/jozoreece), Guitar Anatomy (https://guitaranatomy.com), Armstrong Music (www.armstrongmusic.co.uk) and Wilkinson guitar kits (www.scan.co.uk)

PHOTOS BY DAVE BURRLUCK

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Winding Firebird Pickups

Huw's hand-wound pickups take pride of place on his customer's Gibson Firebird

PHOTOS BY HUW PRICE

People do occasionally ask me to make pickups, but I'm not in the pickup business as such. Instead, I consider repairing and restoring pickups to be among the services I offer as a guitar tech. With the help and encouragement from Stuart Robson of Sunbear Pickups, I began experimenting during the Covid lockdown, and when I found a good deal on a Mojotone winder, I grabbed it.

My research suggested I would break a lot of wire before I acquired sufficient skill to wind complete coils. With that in mind, I bought a spool of relatively cheap polysol magnet wire for practising and resigned myself to lots of frustration and wasted copper. It took me weeks to pluck up the courage to get winding, but I eventually mounted the skeleton of a broken Seymour Duncan S-type pickup on the machine and gave it a whirl.

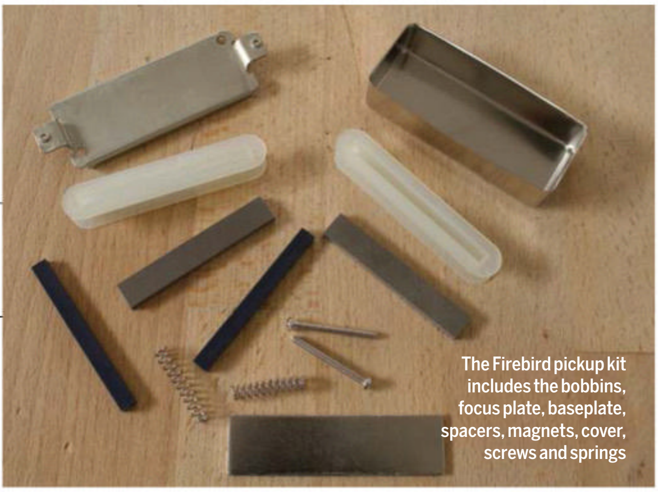
> "Pickup winding is more fiddly than challenging, and although wire does snap, it's rare"

Some 8,350 turns later I was surprised to find myself soldering some leadout wires and getting a healthy DCR reading on my multimeter. Pickup winding is more fiddly than challenging, and although wire does snap, I've found it a rare occurrence. I'm not claiming a magic touch and I have far more to learn about wire tension, scatter patterns and so forth, but I can report that making your own pickups is a lot easier than you might imagine, plus it's loads of fun and the results can be impressive.

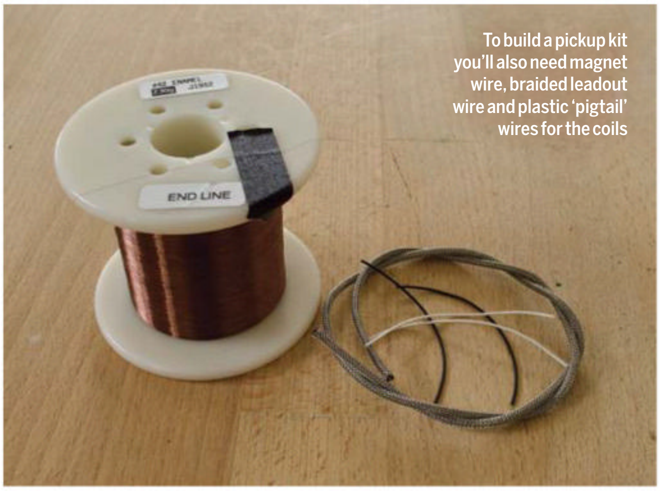
Kitted Out

Until recently, would-be pickup makers had to source parts from a variety of suppliers. Most professionals still do, but these days novices and hobbyists can buy kits of parts for all the iconic pickup types. In the UK, check out Allparts, Alegree, Six String Supplies and Axesrus. In the US, try StewMac and Philadelphia Luthier Tools.

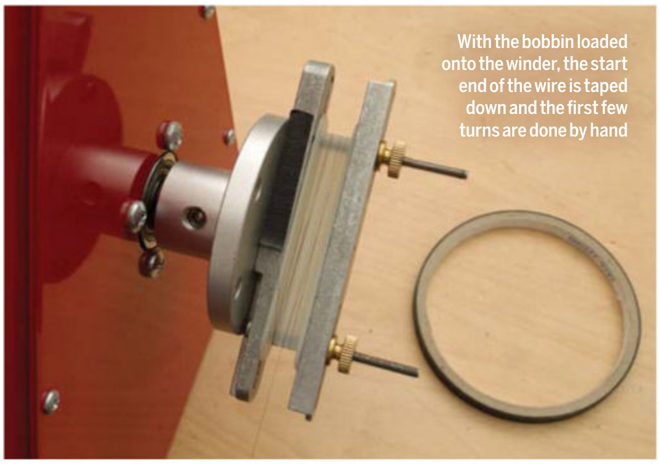
I have mostly made Patent Applied For-style humbuckers and P-90s, along with occasional T-type and S-type sets, and



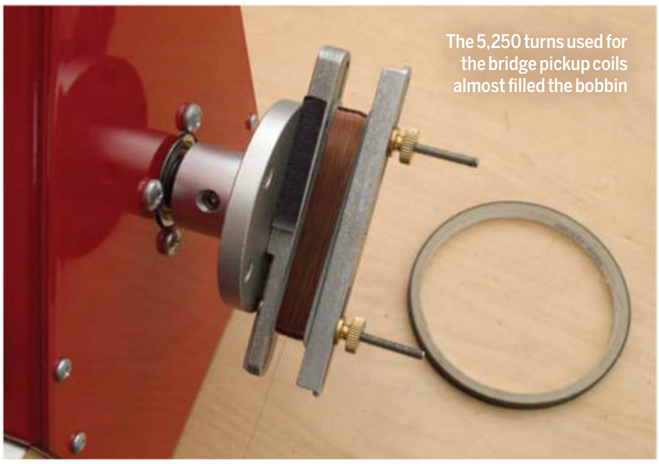
The Firebird pickup kit includes the bobbins, focus plate, baseplate, spacers, magnets, cover, screws and springs



To build a pickup kit you'll also need magnet wire, braided leadout wire and plastic 'pigtail' wires for the coils



With the bobbin loaded onto the winder, the start end of the wire is taped down and the first few turns are done by hand

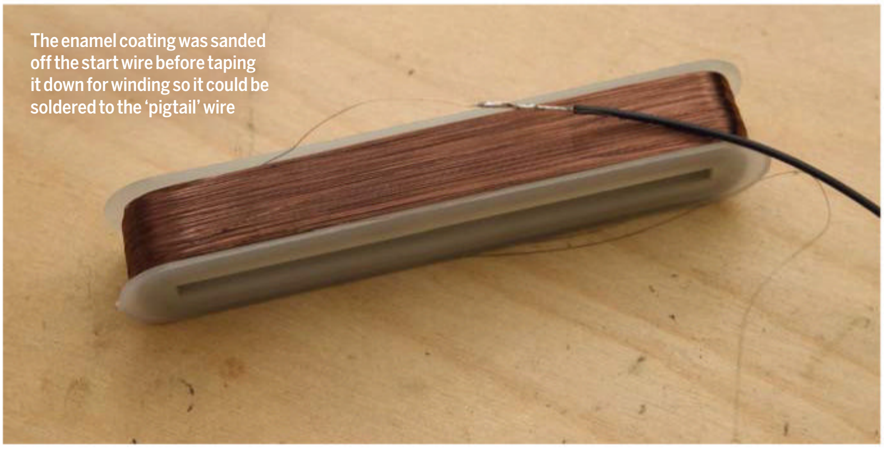


The 5,250 turns used for the bridge pickup coils almost filled the bobbin

since I focus on vintage-correct parts, I'd never considered building from a kit. But then a customer, David, brought me his Gibson Firebird because he couldn't get on with the aftermarket pickups that were installed when he bought the guitar. The pickups sounded too thin, bright and underpowered for David's taste. We discussed various options, including having the pickups modded, but after thinking about it for a couple of days he asked if I would make him a set based on the Axesrus Firebird kit.

The kit comprises a pair of nitrate bobbins, two bar magnets, a cover, a baseplate, two plastic spacers, a steel focusing plate and a steel top-plate. Drop-down menus allow you to choose Alnico V or Alnico II magnets, and covers can be matt black, gold or nickel-plated. Unplated and unpolished raw-nickel covers and polished-nickel covers without a copper layer are also available.

In short, the kit includes all the components specific to Firebird pickups but not quite everything required to build them. In addition to a winding machine, which you'll often find appearing on auction sites for less than £150, you will also need braided leadout wire, thin plastic insulated 'pigtail' wire and magnet wire for the coils.



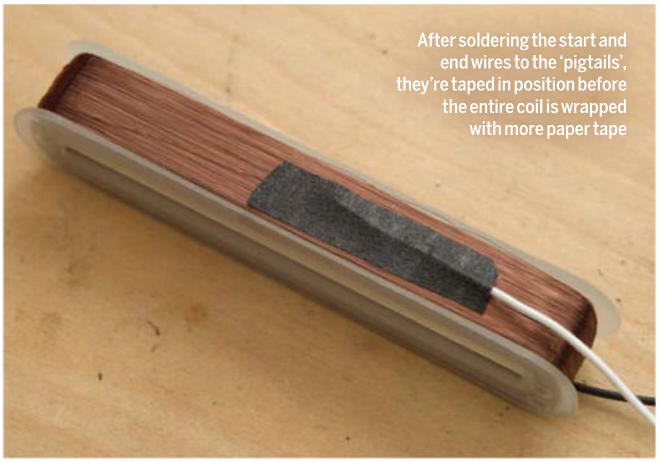
The enamel coating was sanded off the start wire before taping it down for winding so it could be soldered to the 'pigtail' wire

Conveniently, Axesrus sells braided wire and magnet wire, and Allparts UK sometimes has magnet wire in stock. The 'pigtail' wires, which attach to the magnet wire, should be 1mm in diameter or less. If you have any four-conductor humbucker wire offcuts, the individual wires in those are ideal.

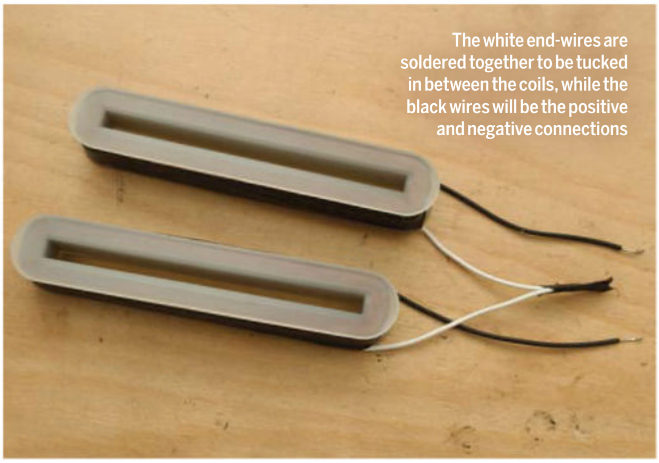
To be fair, the boutique pickups in David's guitar had a sound very much in keeping with vintage Firebirds, but that was the fundamental problem. Loads of us may have drooled over Firebirds, but they're not the easiest of guitars to live with.

My friend Ed Oleszko, who has owned and gigged a vintage Firebird, recently commented that to be a Firebird player you must commit. On gigs, he's able to swap between a Les Paul, Tele, Strat or an ES-335 without needing to alter amp or pedal settings, but Firebirds are not interchangeable in the same way because the pickups can sound extremely bright, metallic and shrill with regular gear settings.

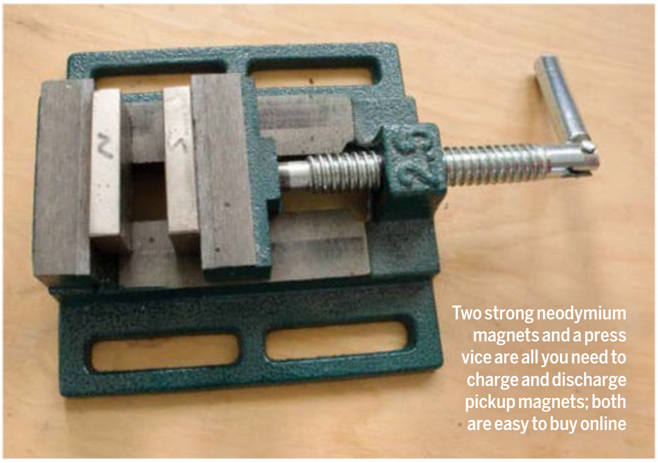
My customer David was hoping for a set of pickups that retained much of the Firebird character but provided a bit more midrange grunt and weren't excessively bright. In other words, he wanted his Firebird to be a bit more versatile and easier on the ears.



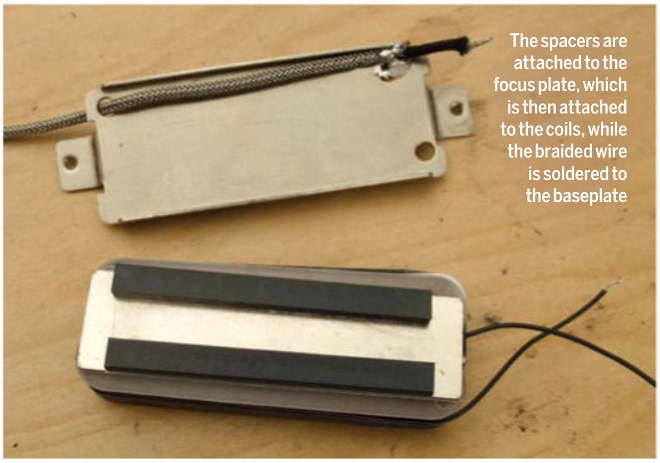
After soldering the start and end wires to the 'pigtails', they're taped in position before the entire coil is wrapped with more paper tape



The white end-wires are soldered together to be tucked in between the coils, while the black wires will be the positive and negative connections



Two strong neodymium magnets and a press vice are all you need to charge and discharge pickup magnets; both are easy to buy online



The spacers are attached to the focus plate, which is then attached to the coils, while the braided wire is soldered to the baseplate

Rolling Clones

The bobbin size and shape, as well as the physical dimensions of any pickup, inevitably affect its sonic characteristics, but there are things builders can do to manipulate the tone within those parameters. With Firebird pickups, builders have magnet options and they can choose the type of magnet wire as well as the coil-winding pattern.

Everybody hears things differently and tastes differ, so you may prefer Alnico II, III, IV or V magnets in your humbuckers. The only way to find out is to try them for yourself – magnets are not particularly expensive. Similarly, magnet wire can influence tone, with heavy formvar associated with a brighter character than plain enamel and polysol.

Researching vintage specifications is a good starting point, if that's what you're shooting for, but using vintage-correct components exclusively is no guarantee of vintage tone. Some suggest today's Alnico grades differ from those of the 50s and 60s, which is why you need to test modern magnets with your ears, rather than your eyes. Others argue that, although the magnet wire was nominally 42-gauge, tolerances were looser. Because vintage wire could be fractionally wider or narrower in diameter, vintage tonal characteristics cannot be replicated with modern 42 AWG magnet wire.

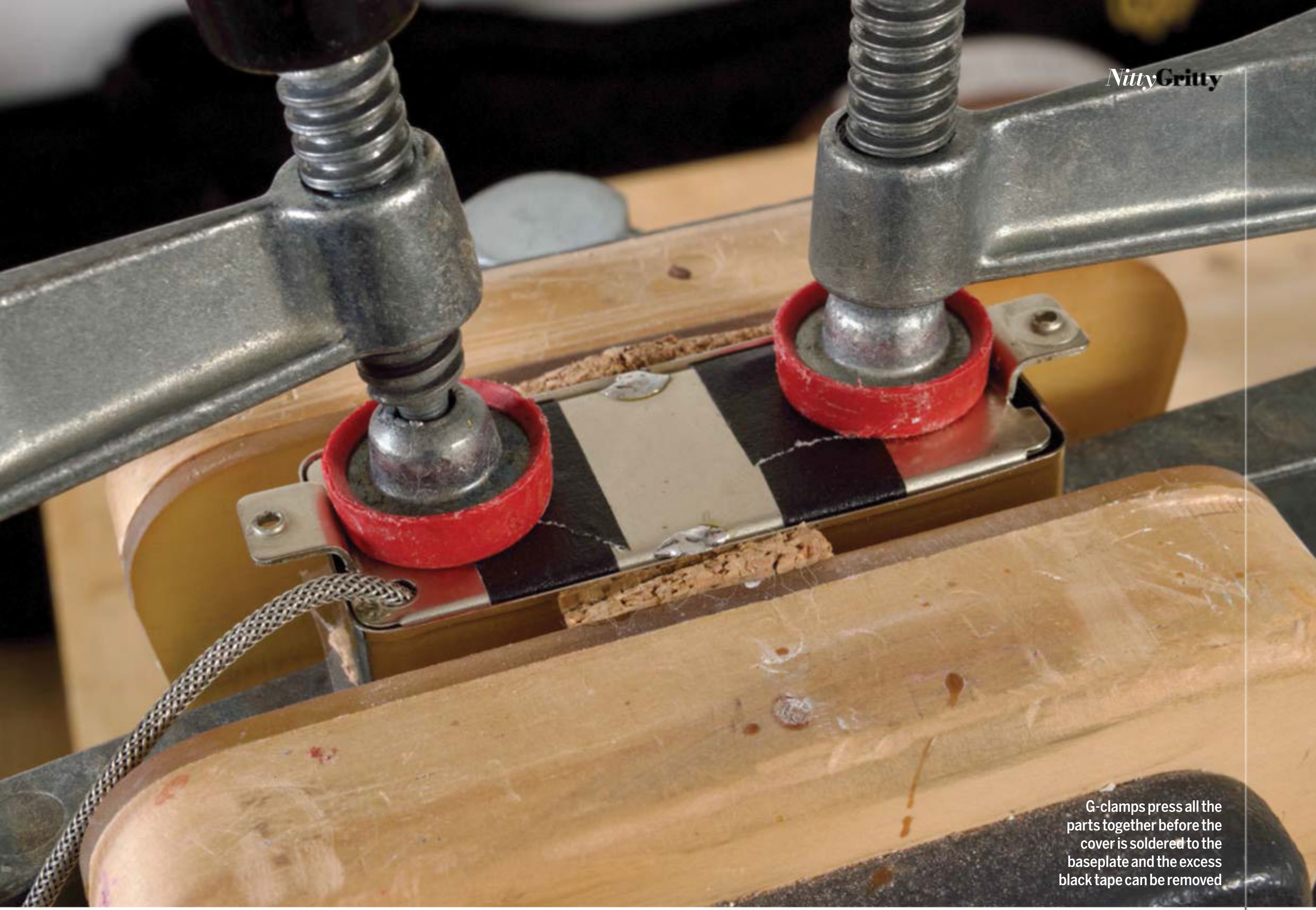
This hypothesis is self-defeating because if you accept the premise that vintage wire ranged in diameter from 41.5 AWG to 42.5 AWG, then it's reasonable to conclude that some batches corresponded exactly to 42 AWG. Therefore, modern magnet wire is no impediment to the recreation of at least some vintage pickups.

The bobbins are taped together and more tape is wrapped around the whole assembly before attaching the cover

Magnetic Personalities

Having disappeared down the magnet rabbit hole when figuring out how to make Patent Applied For-style humbuckers, I concluded that sonic differences cannot be attributed solely to magnetic strength – aka 'gauss'. Without claiming to offer a detailed critique of tonal characteristics, to my ears Alnico II can sound shouty and shrill, while Alnico IV tends somewhat towards blandness.

I'm partial to the woody sweetness of Alnico III in P-90s and lower-output Patent Applied For pickups, and enjoy the brightness, aggression and touch-sensitivity of Alnico V for rockier Patent Applied For units. But, more importantly, with Alnico III and V, I hear the adenoidal cocked-wah midrange that I associate



G-clamps press all the parts together before the cover is soldered to the baseplate and the excess black tape can be removed

with vintage Gibson pickups. Having said that, these findings are based solely on the magnets I buy from Cermag in the UK, and the same grades from other suppliers may sound different.

Since most sources seem to agree that Alnico V was used in vintage Firebird pickups, and my customer wanted higher output with stronger and more characterful mids, I opted for Alnico V magnets when I ordered the kits. But since higher gauss corresponds with brighter treble response, I decided to weaken them.

> "Modern magnet wire is no impediment to the recreation of at least some vintage pickups"

According to the gauss meter on my winding machine, the stock reading was around 900. I keep a pair of powerful neodymium magnets in a press vice for charging pickup magnets. One is north and the other is south, and to charge I adjust the gap between the neodymium magnets so I can just pass a pickup magnet through it.

To weaken magnets, I open up the vice to separate the neodymium magnets and momentarily bring the south side of the pickup magnet to within a couple of centimetres of the north neodymium, and then bring the north side close to the south neodymium.

You'll need a gauss meter to check the results, but if you overdo it, simply recharge the magnets and try again. I took these down to about 650 gauss.

Gibson used plain enamel magnet wire, so it made no sense to do otherwise, but my plan for winding the coils was almost the opposite of how I might configure Patent Applied For coils.

Unlike Firebird pickups, excessive treble is seldom the issue with conventional humbuckers. In fact, many pickup makers deliberately offset Patent Applied For coils to achieve a brighter and clearer tone. As a very rough rule of thumb, the greater the offset, the brighter and more single coil-like the sound.

One way that Patent Number humbuckers supposedly differ from earlier styles of the type is that Gibson had automated the coil-winding process and the machines stopped after a preset number of turns (rather than when an operator decided a bobbin looked full). As a result, the coils were more evenly matched and the pickups sounded a tad darker and fatter in the midrange.

My strategy was to even-match the coils in each pickup and wind them without any scattering. I used Allparts plain enamel wire and found that 5,250 turns equated to a DC resistance reading of 3.7kohms and a combined resistance of 7.4k. I lowered the turns to 4,750 for the neck pickup, which gave me individual coil readings of 3.35k and a combined total of 6.7k. I can't vouch for the accuracy of the inductance or capacitance measurements, but the bridge and neck read 2.6H and 0.027μF, and 2.48H and 0.03μF respectively.

Wrapping Up

Hopefully the accompanying photos will show how the pickups were assembled, and if you need more detail, StewMac's Firebird kit has downloadable step-by-step instructions. You can also find in-depth online tutorials and videos on pickup making, so this feature was mostly intended to demystify the subject and inspire you to give it a go.

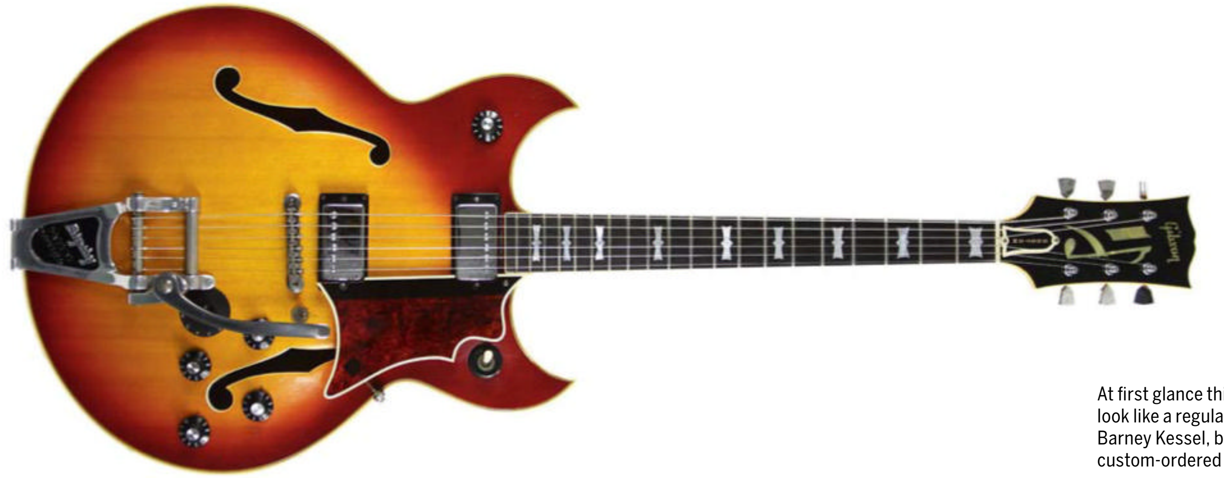
As for my customer David's Firebird, it was a shot in the dark for both of us, but we were both very happily surprised by the way these pickups turned out. The small metal plate that some place over the magnets to tame the treble proved unnecessary and the neck no longer overpowered the bridge. Suffice to say, the strategy worked and these pickups will be staying in the guitar.

www.huwpriceguitar.com

David Davidson's Vintage Icons

This Barney Kessel deviates from the production models and is a unique custom order

1967 Gibson Barney Kessel



At first glance this may look like a regular late-60s Barney Kessel, but it's a custom-ordered one-off

"This isn't a guitar I would normally choose for an article, but I think it demonstrates just how extreme Gibson's custom division was prepared to get in order to make a customer happy back in the day.

"Although T-Bone Walker and Sister Rosetta Tharpe played these guitars, the Barney Kessel has never been a particularly popular model, but this one is custom-made in every single way. The body shape was initially designed for Tal Farlow, but he clearly didn't like it because his signature model eventually became a far more traditional single-cutaway. Instead, Barney Kessel lent his name to the project, despite having no design input, and the Barney Kessel Regular and Custom models were introduced in 1961. Besides a few promotional photos, there is little evidence to suggest Kessel played one and he remained faithful to his ES-350 with a Charlie Christian pickup.

"This guitar was based on the Barney Kessel Custom, so it has the 'bow tie' inlays, rather than split parallelograms, and a musical note inlay on the peghead, rather than a crown. But things start getting really interesting when you look at the body. It's only 2 ¼-inches deep as opposed to the standard three-inch depth, and the top is solid spruce with solid maple back and sides. Early Barney Kessels had laminated spruce tops, but from around 1965 until 1974, when the model was discontinued, production-line bodies were made entirely from laminated maple.

"The back is beautifully figured and there's no centre seam, so they carved it from an unusually wide single piece of maple. The neck is a laminate construction with three strips of figured maple sandwiching two thin strips of darker walnut. 'Waffle back' Kluson tuners grace the headstock, and there is three-ply binding on the back and front.

> "The back is beautifully figured with no centre seam – they carved it from a single piece of maple"

"A Bigsby was also mounted, rather than the standard Barney Kessel tailpiece, but things really start getting funky with the electronics. In addition to the three-way selector switch and regular volume and tone controls for each of the Patent Number T-Top pickups, it has a standby switch, a master volume on the upper horn and a Varitone. All of these were factory fitted – and on top of that, it's stereo. It's almost as if the person who ordered it liked some Gretsch features, but this is all Gibson.

"There's the usual stinger on the back of the headstock, but the metal parts are chrome-plated, rather than gold as you would expect to see on a Barney Kessel Custom model. It has never been messed with and it's a completely original guitar that plays very well and sounds really good.

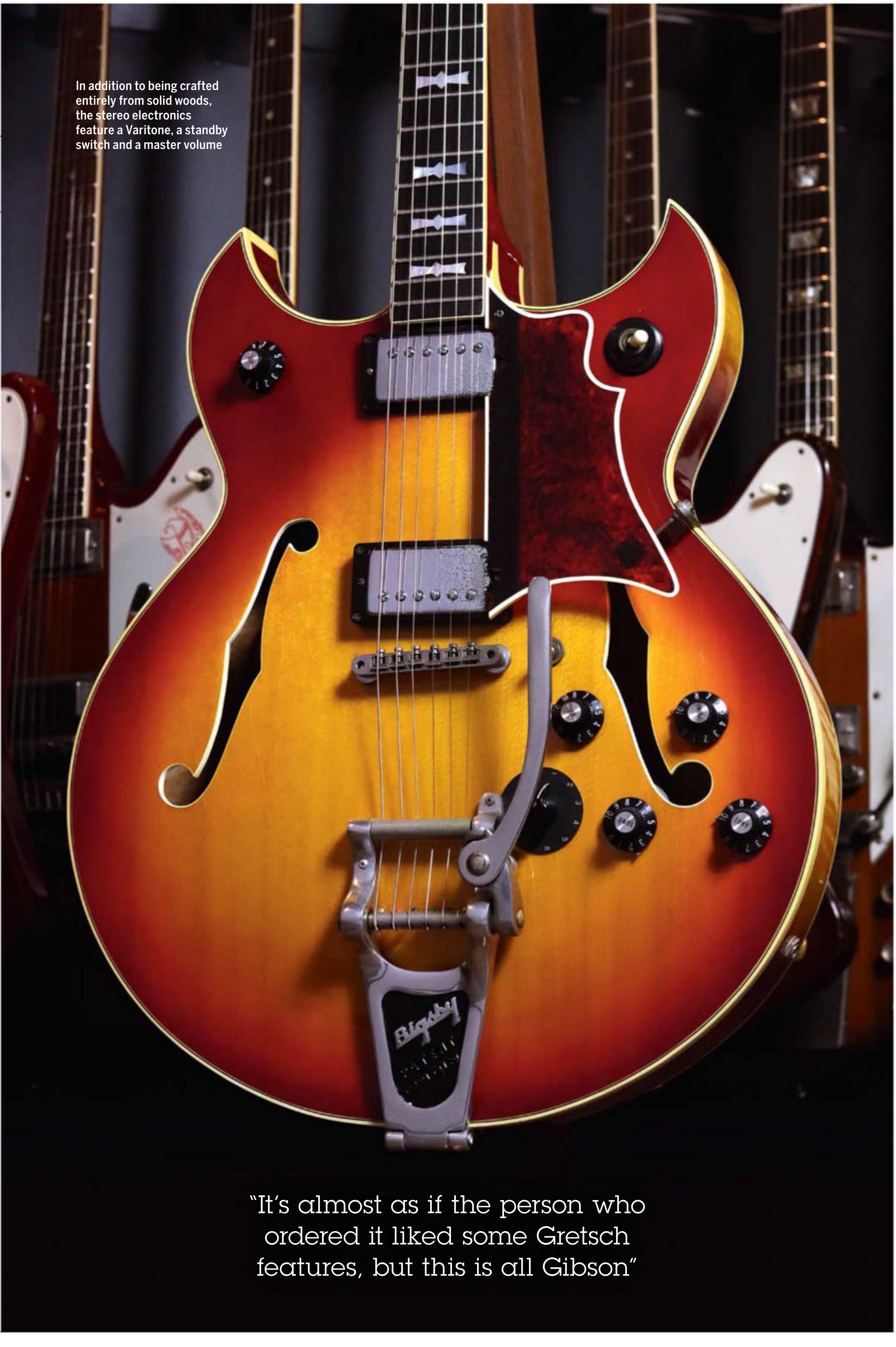
"When I was trying it through a Gibson GA-79 amplifier and a Leslie cabinet that I have in the shop and messing with the Varitone, I was getting a lot of Yes and King Crimson flavour. The neck attachment and deep cutaways allow remarkable upper-fret access for what is essentially a jazz guitar. I particularly like the way that the pickguard is shaped to follow the curve of the cutaway.

"Without effects, the guitar sounds tonally rich, and although there's a vague difference when you compare it to a full-depth Barney Kessel, there's not much in it. At first, I figured it might sound more like a Byrdland, but with the longer 25.5-inch scale length, it really doesn't. It just sounds wonderful.

"The cherry sunburst and the 'witch hat' knobs are typical of 1967, which is when Gibson made this guitar. There is a bit of finish-cracking around the standby switch, but it's only superficial. It was definitely used and there is a bit of tarnishing on the pickups and hardware. The pickguard looks a bit like the Tal Farlow design, but it's a one-off shape and there's a 'custom' plaque up on the headstock. It still has all the build-order paperwork that came from CMI [Chicago Musical Instruments], which was the parent company of Gibson, detailing all the custom appointments, along with the original case.

"When the Gibson Barney Kessel was introduced, customers would have paid $395 for the Regular model and $560 for the Custom, but somebody must have paid a lot more money for this guitar. Everything about it is a total freak – but, without doubt, it's a one of one." **[HP]**

Vintage guitar veteran David Davidson owns Well Strung Guitars in Farmingdale, New York
www.wellstrungguitars.com / info@wellstrungguitars.com / 001 (516) 221-0563



In addition to being crafted entirely from solid woods, the stereo electronics feature a Varitone, a standby switch and a master volume

"It's almost as if the person who ordered it liked some Gretsch features, but this is all Gibson"

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAIGE DAVIDSON / WELL STRUNG GUITARS

Blues Headlines

Richard Barrett is on a mission to make you a better blues player – with full audio examples and backing tracks

Gary Moore

Tutor Richard Barrett | **Gear used** Les Paul Custom, Ibanez Tube Screamer & Marshall JTM45 MkII Reissue
Difficulty ★★★★☆ | 20 mins per example

Gary Moore used maximum drive but reined in the feedback with deft volume control between phrases

PHOTO BY JESSE WILD

BY THE TIME you read this the last remaining guitars of Gary Moore's collection to be auctioned (see The Final Encore in issue 530) will have proud new owners. Though most of us can only imagine what it must be like to own one of those hallowed instruments, we can all take inspiration from the music Gary conjured from their fretboards.

This example solo is influenced by a couple of landmark performances: first, Gary's solo on the original (1974) version of Thin Lizzy's *Still In Love With You*; and second, it borrows ideas from his live performances of *Parisienne Walkways* and *Still Got The Blues* over the years. Though Gary was capable of great delicacy and accuracy on the instrument, this solo was inspired by his more fiery moments, plugging into an already driven Marshall and then boosting further with an Ibanez Tube Screamer. This is a classic combination, similar to how Gary would run his own live rigs.

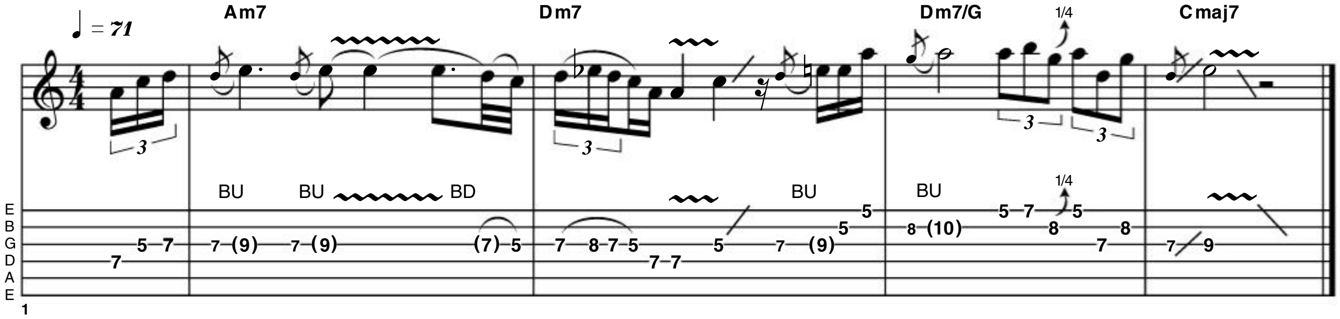
One popular way to use a Tube Screamer is to turn the level up to maximum and hit the amp's input hard. You still get the tone-shaping benefits of the boosted mids and attenuated low-end, and you can add more drive with the gain control if needed.

Gary certainly liked to use a lot of drive and was extremely adept at avoiding unwanted feedback/squealing by zeroing the volume knob between phrases. The Patent Applied For pickups on vintage Les Pauls were not wax-potted, so were more inclined to squeal than many modern ones. Many believe unpotted pickups have a tone of their own, though at those levels, any pickup would be inclined to feed back. Another way Gary handled this was to allow the unused strings to ring momentarily before/between phrases, which gave his playing a rough edge and urgency. Hope you enjoy and see you next time!

Richard Barrett's album, *Colours*, (complete with backing tracks), is available now from iTunes and Amazon

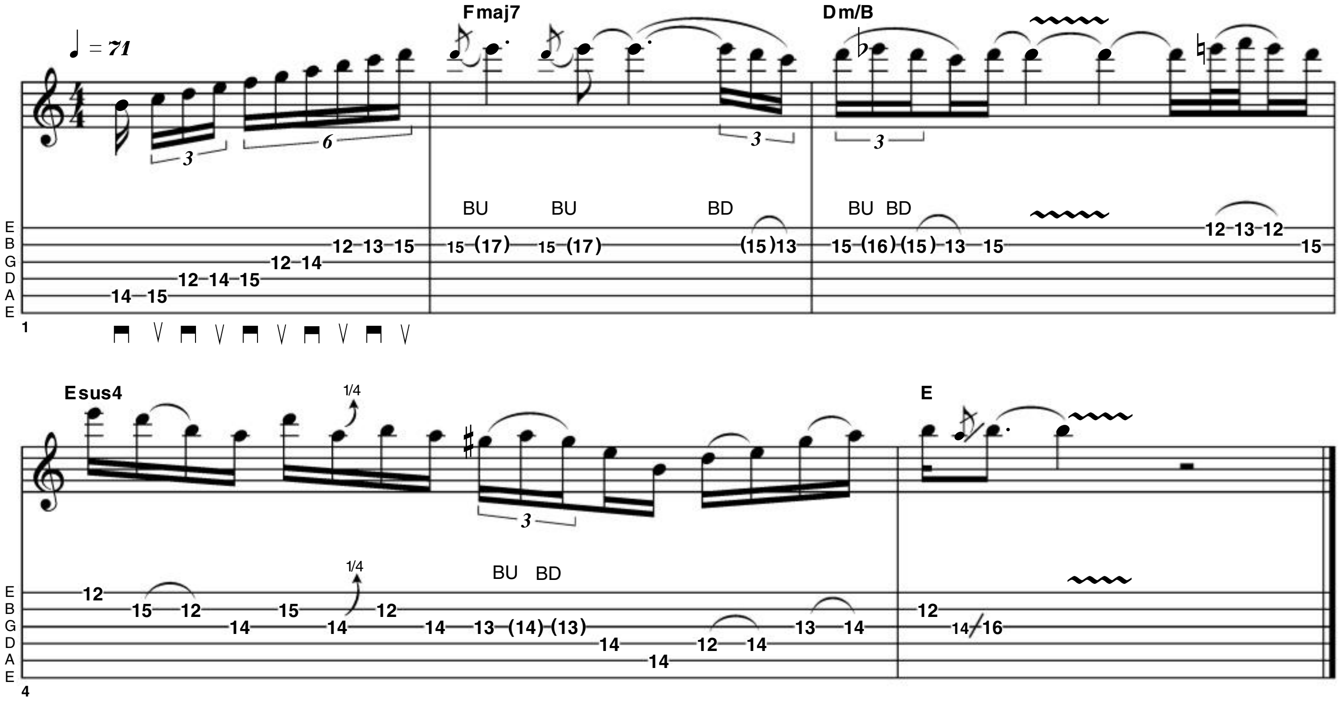
Example 1

THIS OPENING PHRASE stays largely within the shape 1 A minor pentatonic, featuring held bends and controlled vibrato. We're starting low and keeping things relatively simple and melodic for now, leaving some headroom for later on. Gary was conversant with many styles and his note choice would often reflect this, a subtle example being the B in bar 3, which fits over the Dm/G chord. Soon afterwards, the final note (E) is the result of a slide outside shape 1 pentatonic into shape 2.



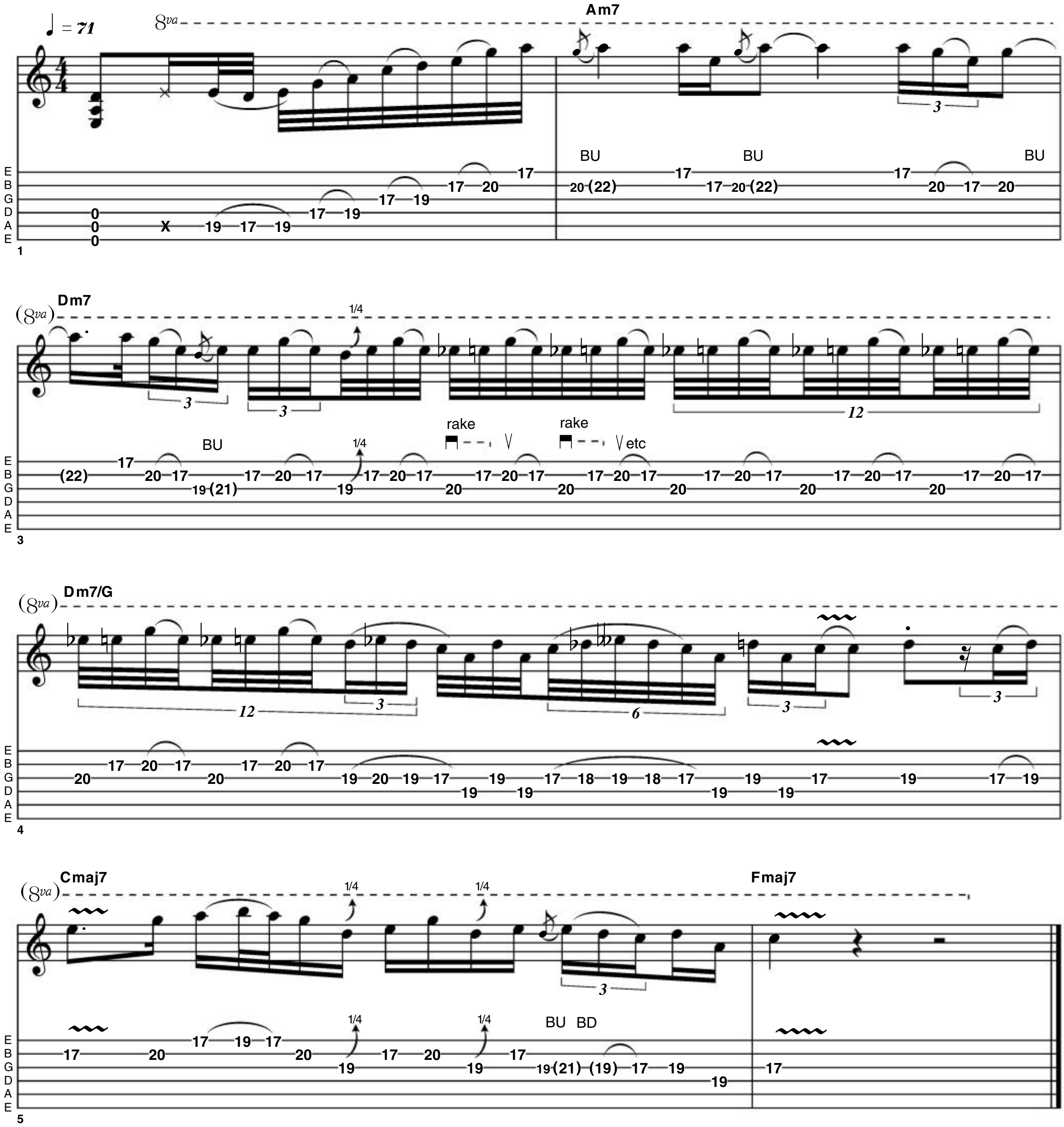
Example 2

WE START WITH THIS ASCENDING C major scale run, ending with a held bend. From here, you could regard this as a shape 4 A minor pentatonic phrase, changing over the subsequent Esus4-E chords to an E dominant 7th arpeggio based phrase (or E Mixolydian if you prefer). These terms can sound a little daunting, but it's important to remind ourselves that they are simply names for sounds. We're staying in the same position on the fretboard throughout.



Example 3

WE'RE REACHING SOMETHING OF A PEAK with this high-register phrase, with higher speed playing and some push/pull in the timing. Also, note the brief open-string noise before the ascending A minor pentatonic run. We're working with shape 1 again here, an octave above the opening phrase. Keep an eye on the picking directions: some of them may seem counterintuitive at first, but they allow you to reach surprisingly high speeds with relatively little effort. This kind of playing was a big influence on the young John Sykes.


♩ = 71
8va
Am7
Dm7
Dm7/G
Cmaj7
Fmaj7
BU
BD
1/4
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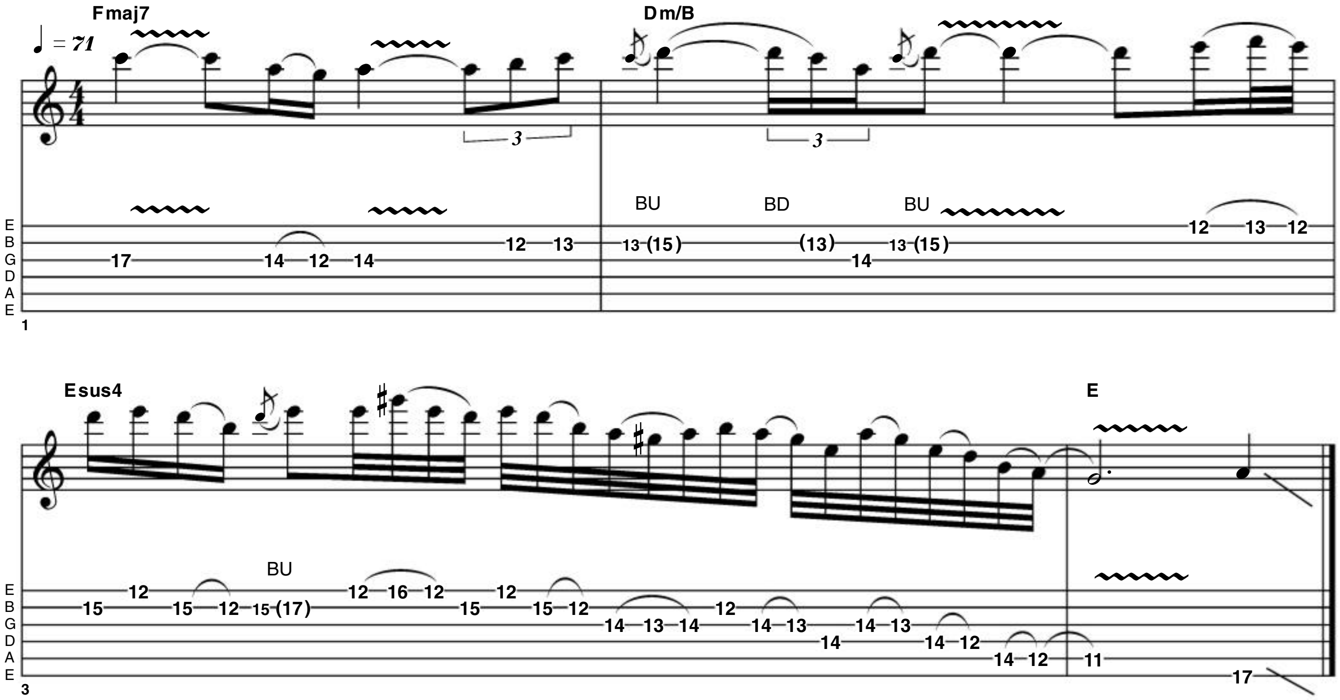
etc
3
6
12
E B G D A E
1
3
4
5

Example 4

KEEPING THINGS SIMPLE AND MELODIC over the Dm/B chord, there is a final flourish coming over the Esus4-E chords with a return to the E dominant 7th arpeggio/E Mixolydian idea. This is more of a nod to Gary's fusion years with Colosseum II, though he does visit this kind of phrasing briefly during the outro of the full length version of *Still Got The Blues*. It just felt right at the time!



Hear It Here

THIN LIZZY
NIGHTLIFE

The version of *Still In Love With You* from this album features Gary's original solo, which inspired Brian Robertson's much-loved version from the *Live And Dangerous* album. This original solo is at a significantly higher tempo yet starts with a classic blues feel. You can hear where Gary's playing would head in later years as the solo progresses to those high notes, though. Another version of this solo worth hearing is by John Sykes on Lizzy's *Life: Live* album.

GARY MOORE
BLUES ALIVE

Taken from recordings of Gary's then-recent 1992 tour, this album is (of course) full of great playing, but make sure to pay particular attention to the live versions of *Still Got The Blues* and *Parisienne Walkways*. These give us the closest insight into how Gary plays in the heat of the moment. You'll hear him allow lots of open strings to ring into and between phrases, which helps minimise unwanted feedback and gives his playing an exciting and urgent edge.

GARY MOORE
BACK ON THE STREETS

This solo album from 1978 showcases Gary's transition from fusion into his 'rock' era, which continued through the 80s. There is the original version of *Parisienne Walkways*, featuring some very precise, controlled playing, and *What Would You Rather Bee Or A Wasp*, which takes a more flamboyant approach but features more fusion-influenced harmonic ideas. The title track demonstrates that Gary was very aware of the punk explosion but didn't feel the need to dumb-down his playing.

Guitarist

PHOTO BY IVAN KEEMAN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

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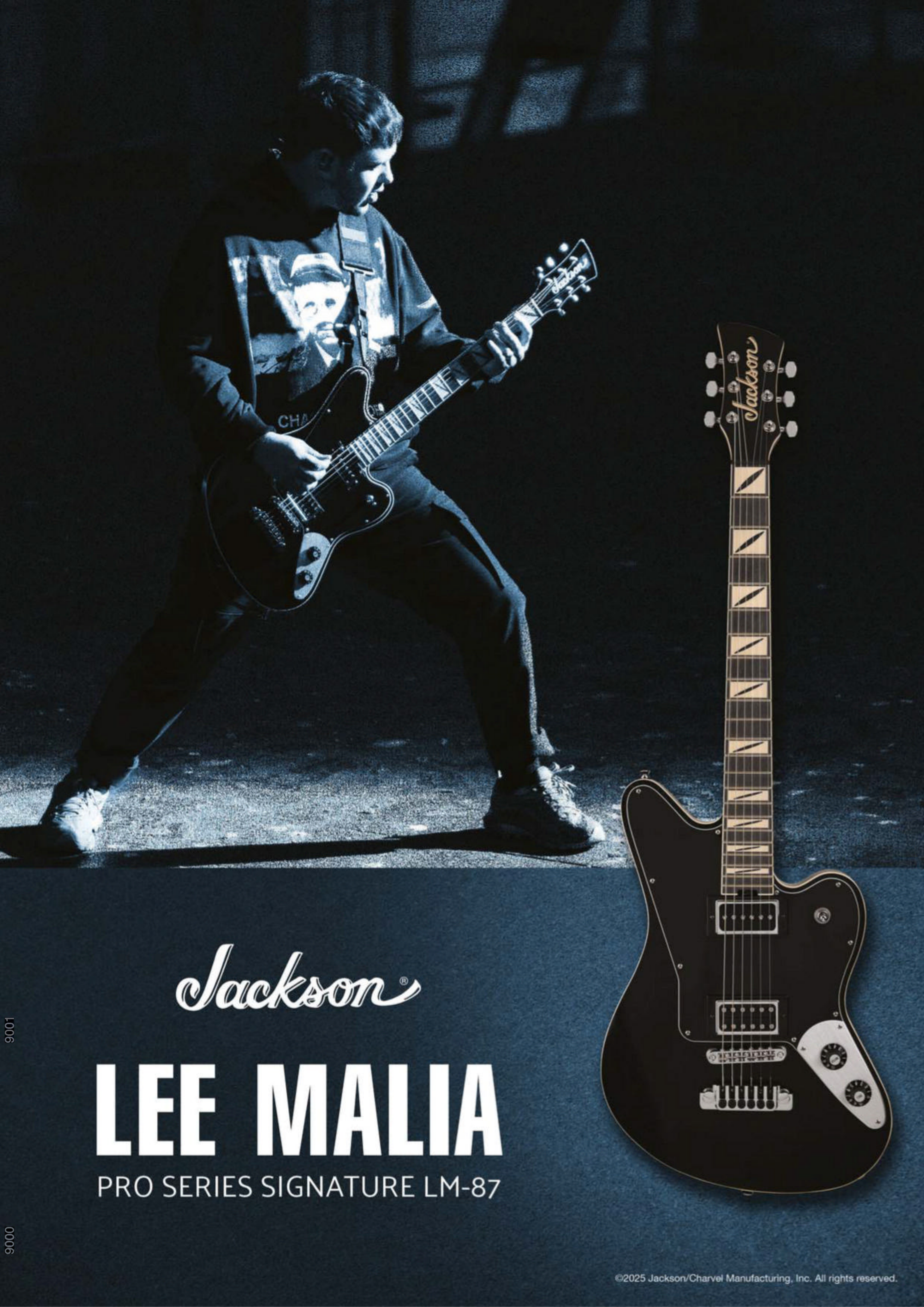

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